If I Needed Someone *Currently Undergoing Revisions*
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If I Needed Someone *Currently Undergoing Revisions*

by yesterdayandtoday

Summary

A pause falls over the group that is so awkward Knox wishes the tiled floor would swallow him whole. It becomes even more awkward when Chet asks, “So, are you seeing anyone, Knox?” with such a shit-eating and self-satisfied smirk on his face that Knox wants to football tackle him into the aisle shelves.

Seriously, fuck this guy.

Knox felt his face heating up and opened his mouth, but before he could get out so much as a syllable about how lackluster his love life is, he found himself startling as he felt an arm wrap lazily around his shoulders.

“Knoxious, babe, where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.” a familiar, uncharacteristically sweet voice says from his left that makes all of the blood rush out of Knox’s face. He felt himself going rigid, not even having to look over to know who had just come waltzing in on their conversation.

Charlie. Fucking Charlie Dalton is trying to pass himself off as Knox’s boyfriend to Chris and her new boyfriend. God, Knox knew he should’ve said no when Charlie begged him to go to the store.

Or: A Fake-Dating AU where Knox finds himself in situations where he has to fake-date his best friend until they fall in love

Monday, Monday

Chapter Notes

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First and foremost, I would love to thank each and every one of you who has commented something nice on his fic over the last few years while this fic has been on hiatus. Each and everyone of your comments has not gone ignored and has given me motivation to rewrite this fic the way that I would like and finish this story after three years without posting any updates.

A special dedication to my friends, Auxctor on A03 and Megan, as well as Adana, for being some of my main muses for inspiration through this hiatus <3

With that, I hope all of you enjoy,

Ali (yesterdayandtoday)

Similar to how every bad situation Knox Overstreet has gotten himself into started, it all can be traced back to Charlie Dalton.

There is an almost comical song and dance routine Charlie has fallen into that Knox finds himself to be all too familiar with when it comes to Charlie's attempts at dragging Knox along with whatever "spur of the moment adventure" he has in mind for the evening.

This little routine was something Knox vaguely knew the timeline of when they were neighbors across the hall from each other during their first year at Columbia. Still, it is now something Knox has gotten down to a perfected science since the two of them transitioned from across-the-hall neighbors to best friends turned roommates who had just gotten their first "adult" apartment off campus together.

Charlie always starts his theatrics off by dramatically barging into whatever room Knox finds himself in as a way to announce his arrival. Then, just as dramatically, he will practically start crawling on his hands and knees right through their small foyer into the living room, begging Knox to join in on whatever mischievous prank, party, or spur-of-the-moment adventure he has in mind for the evening.

Knowing this, Knox does not find himself to be all that surprised when he suddenly hears the sound of thundering footsteps coming down the hallway a Thursday evening a few weeks before the start of the new semester. He glances up from where he is glossing over the syllabus for the History of Popular Culture class he is going to be TA-ing for with an expectant raise of his brow, the one Meeks has proclaimed perfected his "unamused TA waiting for the class to quiet down" expression. Sure enough, Charlie is hovering in the entryway that leads into their living room, having the nerve to look *sheepish* as he starts rolling on his heel like a school kid attempting to hide the vase he broke behind his back.

That innocent look could fool those who don't know Charlie, but anyone who has known Charlie for at least five minutes knows that look means trouble and that if you were on the receiving end of it, you should run for your fucking *life* .

"Okay, what are you up to?" Knox demands flatly, not even allowing Charlie to start whatever theatrical speech he had most likely pre-planned before storming into their living room. Knox has figured out in his few-week tenure of living with Charlie that it's best to try to cut Charlie's antics off in the bud, or else they will grow to life-size proportions, and the resulting chaos will most definitely ensue.

The shenanigans Charlie pulls on the regular don't frustrate Knox as much as they frustrate and will forever frustrate Richard Cameron, Charlie's roommate during their first two years at Columbia and most definitely the easiest to pick on members in their college friend group. Knox guesses that his nonchalant approach to Charlie could have to do with a variety of things; Knox's similar but more grounded troublemaking streak, the fact that Knox finds a much more amused fondness in Charlie's practical jokes, or because Knox is more hardened to the kind of shit Charlie pulls as he is the oldest out of three siblings. Whatever it is, Knox knew how to handle Charlie's antics better than almost all of the poets except for Neil, which has branded him as Charlie's unofficial handler since the early foundations of the friend group.

"Knoxious, Knoxious, Knoxious," Charlie sings the nickname he's branded Knox with as he practically prowls into their living room. He collapses onto their sofa and wrings his hands, raising his eyebrows in a pointed yet strangely comedic fashion at Knox that forces him to fight down the smile that is starting to twitch at the corners of his mouth. "Why would you accuse me of such a thing? With *no* groundwork to back the basis of your argument whatsoever?"

“Because it’s you and your track record has not failed me yet,” Knox snorts as he closes his laptop, now unable to help the full-fledged smile that’s on his face. “Now, are you going to tell me what’s up or am I going to have to keep prying information out of you?”

The question makes Charlie let out a mock gasp of horror that would give Neil a run for his money.

“You wound me, Overstreet,” he admonishes. “Absolutely *wound me.* ”

“Charlie-”

“What would your mother say about such rude behavior? I know she didn’t raise you this way.”

“Charlie-” is all Knox can repeat, his voice coming out breathless from how much he’s now starting to laugh.

“Don’t you know it’s rude to just *assume* that I am up to something? Don’t you think I have learned from the error of my ways and want to turn over a new leaf?”

Jesus Christ, this whole argument is fucking ridiculous.

“You are fucking ridiculous, I hope you know that,” Knox makes a point of telling him out loud, which causes Charlie to let out a surprised laugh that looks forced out of him. Feeling emboldened, Knox continues. “Anyone who methodically wrings their hands like that is guilty of something, I don’t care who you are. It makes you look like Mr. Burns.”

Much to Knox’s amusement, the comment makes Charlie stop wringing his hands immediately.

“Touche,” he grumbles, and the frustrated scowl that is now starting to appear on his face makes Knox let out another loud laugh. To Knox’s surprised laugh, Charlie lets out another snort, and that frustrated scowl is back to his usual mischievous grin. “But fine, I’ll cave, since you want to know *that* badly what I’m up to.”

He pauses dramatically, which is something he has an affinity for before going into some over-the-top dramatic story, and Jesus Christ, this better be good.

“I need you to bring me to the grocery store.”

And, seriously- that's *it?*

"Okay," Knox says slowly, shifting his posture so he is sitting up straighter. He has to fight the urge to roll his eyes in fond exasperation. "What do you wanna buy from the grocery store that is going to fuck with Cameron?"

"Who said it was to fuck with Cameron?" Charlie asks, a little too quickly. When catching sight of the unimpressed look that Knox gives him, he immediately concedes. "Okay, fine, it's to fuck with Cameron. I need to pick up some toothpaste and Oreos."

"Toothpaste and oreos," Knox muses, practically sinking back into the body of the armchair as he crosses his arms over his chest, a smirk of his starting to make its way onto his face. "Isn't that a little too cliche for Charlie Dalton's tastes? Neil would say you lost your touch."

"I wouldn't call it cliche, Knoxious, I think it's classic," Charlie's smirk turns into something akin to a genuine smile. "Classic will throw Cameron off his toes. Now, are you going to drive me to the store and help me out or not?"

Knox sits there in silence for a moment. Then two, despite the fact he has already made up his mind.

Similar to how every single bad situation Knox Overstreet has gotten himself into started, he ends up caving in and agreeing to go along with whatever Charlie's crazy brain seems to have concocted.

As soon as Knox confirms that yes, he will drive Charlie's sorry ass to the grocery store, Charlie springs up from where he collapsed onto the small loveseat, an accomplished look on his face.

"Knox Irwin Overstreet, you truly are one fine, upstanding citizen, do you know that?"

"Well, one of us has to be," Knox scoffs with a roll of his eyes as he gets up, sliding on his Oxfords and grabbing his car keys off the counter near the stove before trailing after Charlie toward where he parked his light gray Subaru Forester outside their apartment complex.

Nothing terrible happened on the journey down to Knox's car, or even the entire drive to the grocery store, save for the routine argument Charlie got into with Knox about how he always listened to the oldies station and never listened to "good music."

No, it had been when they actually got to the grocery store when shit hit the fan.

They aren't even through the sliding glass doors of their nearest Trader Joe's for a full minute before Charlie grabs one of the little plastic grocery baskets and darts into the belly of the store. He hollers something nonsensically over his shoulder at Knox about "needing to grab his supplies" before making a vague promise of meeting up with him later.

Knox stands in the entryway's automatic door, frozen as he stares at Charlie's retreating form, in a mild state of disbelief at just how quickly he had gotten abandoned.

Some friend you are , Knox thinks with a miffed sigh, before grabbing one of his own grocery baskets and making his way into the store at a slower pace than Charlie had taken on. He starts his shopping by weaving through the produce aisle on the outskirts of the store, referring to the quick grocery list he wrote up in the car every few minutes to make sure he is grabbing everything he needs.

He then made the mistake of heading to the spice store, which, if he had the twenty-twenty foresight, he would have walked out of the grocery store right then and there.

Knox blames Charlie for it, really, due to a once a month argument about whether or not spices were necessary in the kitchen. Knox- who had grown up loving to cook and knowing his way around the kitchen fairly well- was adamant about how spices were important and necessary in improving upon the taste of a meal. Charlie, on the other hand, couldn't care less. Which always managed to piss Knox off, since Charlie had no cooking experience whatsoever and would rather order takeout before even attempting to cook anything. Which Knox says forfeits Charlie's rights to any sort of argument, which Charlie counters make him more justified in his staunch, incorrect beliefs.

Knox began making his way down the aisle, his eyes scanning the names on the jars. He grabs some garlic powder and onion powder immediately before taking a few more steps forward, his eyes squinting as he scans over his other options. He ends up getting so caught up in scanning over the spices that he almost misses the two newest additions to the aisle; a short blonde woman with shoulder-length hair and her new tall, brunet boyfriend.

Knox immediately feels himself tense up. Even when only catching a

glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye, Knox already knows with certainty who is making her way down the spice aisle towards him, blissfully unaware: Chris Noel, Knox's first real girlfriend, recently turned ex-girlfriend. He had been fortunate enough not to have run into Chris out in public since their breakup a couple of months ago in early May, right when their sophomore year of college wrapped up. It made sense why Knox hadn't run into her, yet; they lived in the suburbs of New York City. But then again, they lived in *New York fucking City,* so the odds of running into her at *all* when they go to two separate colleges in different areas of the state truly confirmed his suspicions that God had a really fucked up sense of humor.

It also didn't help that Knox felt like their breakup came out of nowhere, too. He thought they were happy, and that things were going great. So when she told Knox that she is beginning not to view Knox the same way and would prefer to "remain friends", it completely crushed him. He respected the honesty from her, he really did. It just hurt. And it hurt fucking *bad* .

After a long summer burying himself in summer class work and moving into his new apartment with Charlie, Knox is now starting to grapple with getting over his relationship with her. However, Knox somewhat bitterly realizes Chris didn't seem to have the same problem moving on from their relationship, judging from the domestic Trader Joe's run with the aforementioned new boyfriend her arm is looped with.

Just the sight of him makes Knox grind his teeth together. Because-

Really, this is just his fucking luck.

It is one thing to spot Chris out and about in the city after an awkwardly one-sided breakup, but it is a whole other thing to spot her with her new rich, football-playing boyfriend Chet Danbury, who somehow managed to look like a smug piece of shit in every single photo she posted with him. Not only that, but the icing on Knox's already shitty and burnt birthday cake is that they were starting to make their way in his direction. And *fast* .

Fuck.

So now here Knox is, trying not to lose his shit as he awkwardly shuffles around in an attempt to blend in with the few other spice-aisle patrons who are going to be on the receiving end of an awkward encounter.

Knox immediately vows he is going to kill Charlie when he finds him in the store later because none of this shit would have happened if Charlie had stuck together with Knox when they arrived at the store. Or, even better: if Charlie never dragged him here in the first place.

He contemplates running for it, even prays they might turn around and exit the aisle so Knox can make a mad dash for the exit. But instead of doing either of these things, they begin drawing closer.

Fucking *fuck* .

Please don't let her spot me, please don't let her spot me , Knox practically begs whatever all-mighty being is staring down at him.

"Knox?" a soft, inquiring voice asks instead.

God Dammit .

Knox slowly spins around to face Chris and the devil incarnate, trying his hardest to force a cheerful smile. "Chris! H-hi!" he greets, internally cringing at how high-pitched his voice comes out.

"Hi! How have you been?" Chris has a kind smile as she stares up at him, a stark contrast to the possessive look Chet is sending in his direction. He makes it an avid point to start sizing Knox up in the middle of the aisle, staring with a downturn tilt of his mouth at the way Knox has his sweater tied around his neck.

Knox has to fight the urge to rip it off.

"Um, I've been alright," he coughs, fiddling with the handles of his grocery basket nervously. "I've been busy with summer classes since changing my major and moving into an apartment with Charlie. I also have been getting everything prepped for the class I am going to be TA-ing for in the fall."

Chris nods her head politely at this and thankfully doesn't mention how both of them moving together into an off-campus apartment was originally supposed to be *their* plan for the upcoming year. Knox isn't entirely sure what he would have done if Charlie hadn't stepped in at the last minute and agreed to be his roommate.

"Are you still TA-ing for that History of Pop Culture class with Dr. Callahan?"

Knox nods his head, a more genuine smile making its way onto his

face.

“Yeah, we've been brainstorming ideas on possibly taking a different approach this semester. We have done a focus on Medievalism in the past but we might do a focus on American Pop culture this semester because my history concentration is in United States history.” After a horrifying moment, Knox realizes he has been rambling for a little too long so he nervously pivots the conversation. “Wh-what about you? How have you been? It’s been a while.”

“Three months,” Chet oh-so-helpfully supplies. The possessive look on his face is now replaced with something a lot more smug and a hell of a lot more punchable as he wrapped an arm around her waist. On the surface level, it seemed like an innocuous gesture. But Knox damn well knows Chet is trying to stake his claim. “Not that anyone’s counting.”

The smile on Knox’s face falls off in an instant. How could someone who is so amazing have such a shithead for a boyfriend? It doesn’t make any damn sense; the fact also made Knox feel a little insecure with himself, too; Knox isn’t a narcissist, but he didn’t think he is a shitty person and always prided himself on his honesty and his tendency to try to do the right thing, even if it killed him. So, if Chris broke up with Knox to start dating *Chet Danbury* , then is Knox by extension a *shittier* person?

“I’m good,” Chris smiles easily, promptly ignoring her boyfriend’s attempts at starting some sort of pissing contest. “I got admitted into the advanced nursing program I wanted to get into at Pace a few weeks ago so I am mentally gearing up for a rough semester.”

“That’s amazing, Chris. I know how hard you’ve been working.” Knox says, scratching the back of his head.

A silent lull falls over the group that is so damn awkward Knox wishes the tile floor would just swallow him whole. It becomes even more awkward when Chet asks, “So, are you seeing anyone, Knox?” with such a shit-eating and self-satisfied smirk on his face that Knox wants to football tackle him on the aisle shelves.

Okay, seriously, fuck this guy.

Knox’s face heats up in shame at the question and opens his mouth, but before he can get out even so much as a syllable about how hopelessly single he is, he feels an arm drape lazily around his shoulders, startling him.

“Knoxious, babe, where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you!” a familiar, uncharacteristically sweet voice says from his left, making all of the blood rush out of Knox’s face. He feels himself going rigid, not even having to look over to know who had just come waltzing in on their conversation.

Charlie. Fucking Charlie Dalton is trying to pass himself off as Knox’s boyfriend to his ex and her new boyfriend. God, Knox knew he should’ve said no when Charlie begged him to go to the store.

Knox snaps his head over to where Charlie is standing, ready to ask him *what the fuck he is doing* when something stops him in his tracks.

“Knoxious?” Chet spits out derisively and there is no way in hell Knox imagines the downturn his mouth makes as he stares at Charlie’s arm. It was a far cry from a smirk; it is a sneer. Chet Danbury is honest to God, sneering at them.

Immediately, Knox feels the anger bubble up in his stomach at the acidity in Chet’s tone, and that fact alone is what makes Knox wrap his arm around Charlie’s waist with his free arm, bringing him so close so that their bodies are pressed together in an attempt to make them look like the picture-perfect version of every gay couple in a Tiffany’s commercial.

Because fuck Chet Danbury. *Fuck him* . If that is how he is going to be, then Knox is going to go along with this bit for the afternoon on the sheer principle alone that it will piss Chet off.

“It’s my pet name for him,” Charlie explains flippantly. He has his trademark lazy grin plastered onto his face as he talks, but he isn’t fooling Knox for a second. He can tell by the distasteful glint in his eye that Charlie doesn’t like this asshole as much as he does, if not, more. He most likely would’ve decked this guy in the middle of the store while he is at it, but most likely didn’t because- “Oh, and hey, Chris. Fancy seeing you here.”

Chris stares, squinting her eyes at Charlie for a few seconds before her eyes widen in recognition.

“Oh my god, Charlie?! I can’t believe it!” she exclaims with such a bright smile it made Knox’s heartache, hating the way longingness is rearing its ugly head. She flings her arms out and gives Charlie a hug, patting his shoulders a few times before letting go and resuming her place next to Chet, who looks pissed off to see Chris so excited about hugging someone, even if it was just a friend she met as an avenue

through her last relationship. “Knox told us that you both just moved into an apartment together, but he didn’t mention you two had started dating.”

As Knox wraps his arm back around Charlie’s waist, he tries his hardest not to feel petty. All Chris gave him was a nice smile and a ‘how have you been?’ and the two of them dated for almost two years. Charlie is Knox’s best friend who Chris only saw on occasion and yet he gets a bright grin and a tight hug. In what world does *that* make sense?

“It’s still kinda new, so we are working on that transition of calling each other boyfriends. Plus I bet he got distracted talking about the class he TA’s for.” Charlie rolls his eyes, the way he exclusively saves for Knox whenever he does something that amuses him. “Did Knox mention that he is going to be taking up being in charge of the TA training program for the History Department? He’s the only undergraduate in the program but he is going to be the TA advisor for all of the new graduate TA’s this semester cause he has been in the program the longest.”

“Charlie-” Knox starts nervously, feeling his face heat up.

“No, he never mentioned anything about that, that is amazing.”

“I’m a proud boyfriend, what can I say?” Charlie winks, which makes Chriss giggle despite herself, and the dark scowl on Chet’s face grows *deeper*.

Any feelings of satisfaction Knox has at the annoyed look on Chet’s face immediately dissipate on the spot, however, when he feels Charlie sneak his hand into the back pocket of Knox’s jeans before ceremoniously grabbing his ass. Mortification floods through Knox’s entire body, his face most likely flushing as red as the flannel he is wearing.

This isn’t fucking happening. This isn’t fucking *happening*.

Charlie did not just grab his ass. In a crowded store. In front of apparently homophobic Chet Danbury, of all people. Whatever weird Twilight Zone episode Knox accidentally stumbled into he wanted out of right now.

“So, how long have you two been dating?” Chris inquires with a tilt of her head after a few moments of enduring a painfully awkward silence that has been filled with Knox gaping like an idiot at the fact his ass

just got grabbed and Charlie having an insufferably smug expression on his face.

“A few weeks-”

“Two months.”

The two of them freeze.

Charlie pinches Knox’s ass, clearly a signal of some kind. Knox grinds his teeth together, thinking that if Charlie pinches his ass one more time, he is going to make him walk home. But he thinks he has an understanding of what he’s getting at.

“A few weeks.” the two of them say together with matching grins. Knox crosses his fingers Chris buys the lie.

“That’s lovely.” she beams, clapping her hands. If she notices their blunder, she doesn’t make it apparent. “You two make such a lovely couple.”

“Why thank you, Chris,” Charlie pauses for a moment, taking in the sneer that is still adorning Chet’s face. His eyes lit up mischievously. “How long have you and…. Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t believe I know who you are?”

Knox pinches Charlie as hard as he can, even though he is trying his hardest to fight a smile.

“Chet Danbury,” Chet supplies with an air of arrogance. He straightens his posture, just to be a little bit more of a dick. “I play football at Pace University on a full ride.”

“Ohhh, so that’s why Knox and I haven’t seen you before. We go to Columbia, you see. We just live here in Westchester so we don’t have to pay a fuck ton in rent.”

Chet snaps his gaze over to Charlie, looking like he swallowed a lemon. Knox had to force a cough to cover the snicker he failed to let escape.

“And you are?” Chet asks haughtily. His eyes dip down to examine the vintage Columbia University sweatshirt and gold class ring Charlie had on, as well as his black ripped jeans and his Converse that have holes the size of craters. He then goes on to distastefully eye the basket full of the Trader Joe’s brand Oreos and toothpaste Charlie is

swinging with his left hand.

Charlie is the antithesis of every model Ivy League student, so Knox could understand where Chet's suspicion came from. But Charlie held legacy status at Columbia with his father and a few other relatives attending the school, and while he'd rather go on wild adventures and party than spend his nights studying for tests, Charlie is sharp as a whip.

"Charlie Dalton, goalie for the Columbia men's soccer team," Charlie introduces himself with a dramatic flourish. "Or as everyone more commonly refers to me: *Nuwanda* ."

Knox and Chris let out matching snorts of amusement. The vein that had been forming on Chet's forehead since Charlie started talking only seemed to get *larger* as Charlie mentioned the nickname that he had brandished himself with.

Sensing the impending crisis that could go underway, Chris took responsibility for ending the conversation.

"Hey, it was so great running into you two. We should definitely all hang out sometime soon."

No. No, they definitely should not.

"Yes." Knox blurts out dumbly instead.

"Definitely! Wouldn't miss it for the world!" Charlie agrees with a grin and spins Knox around dramatically so they begin walking in the other direction, almost sending Knox tumbling to the ground with the sheer force of his movements. Knox barely manages to wave over his shoulder and catches sight of Chris trying to smother a laugh. Even Chet looks a tiny bit amused. Or at least he did, until Charlie hollers out, "It was nice seeing you again, Chris! And nice meeting you, too, Chad!"

Knox bends his head and giggles and a few seconds later, Charlie begins giggling along with him as they make their way down the aisle, like they were school kids who just put a tack on the teacher's chair.

"You are fucking insane, I hope you realize that," Knox laughs, but he cannot help the wide grin on his face. "I thought *Chad* was going to beat us up back there for a second."

"Well, I'd like to see him try," Charlie rolls his eyes, but he is

laughing, also. “Besides, in my experience, guys who are cocky like that are always compensating for something; he’s either got a really small dick or he’s a shit fighter.”

When their laughter subsides, Knox fixes Charlie with a long look.

“You took me by surprise back there.”

Since it’s Charlie, and they are always in step with each other on everything, Knox doesn’t have to elaborate further.

“What, me pretending to be your boyfriend or grabbing your ass?”

The question makes Knox’s face heat up.

“ *Both* .”

“Well, I was a couple of aisles over grabbing the toothpaste that I needed when I accidentally eavesdropped on your guys’ conversation. It caused me *actual physical pain* , so I came over to rescue you. It would be morally wrong if I hadn't.”

“Which you wouldn’t have had to do if you didn’t abandon me at the front of the store,” Knox points out with a raise of his brow, which prompts Charlie to knock their grocery baskets together. Knox mindlessly klinks Charlie’s basket in retaliation. “And what happened to faking an emergency and leaving? Why does ‘fake boyfriend’ rank first on your list of ways to rescue me?”

“Pretending to be your boyfriend and finding an excuse to piss off Chet Danbury, star of the Pace University Football team, was too tempting of an idea to pass up.” Charlie snorts, and Knox finds himself repeating the same thoughts he had earlier: some true friend Charlie is.

“So you wanted to laugh at my expense?”

“Oh no, no. I was genuinely trying to help. And getting to grab your ass was just a bonus,” Charlie grins up at Knox impishly, and then *winks* , before taking off a little bit in front of Knox so he can get in line at the self-checkout.

Knox stares after Charlie in bewilderment, his face heating up. He has always known Charlie had a crude sense of humor, always making lewd comments or jokes in an attempt to get a rise out of people, mainly Cameron or a few of his soccer teammates.

It’s so strange to see the jokes reflected at *him* , of all people, that it almost puts Knox in a daze, that only gets broken when a college-aged girl his age asks if he is going to move anytime soon.

Swallowing thickly, Knox shakes his head and moves towards the register, trying to get the whole situation out of his head.

The Boys Are Back in Town

Chapter Summary

Charlie's eye's narrow further, before his signature "I'm about to fuck with Cameron hardcore" expression takes over.

He lets out a loud sneeze, but instead of covering his nose, he dramatically directs it at Cameron.

Cameron practically clams up at the contact the sneeze has against his back and is silent for a few moments before letting out a screech of frustration that echoes comically in the near-empty city streets.

"You're so disgusting!" he all but shrieks, pushing back at Charlie, who is throwing his head back and laughing too much to take the assault seriously. Cameron then looks over his shoulder and shoots a withering look at Knox. As if he is the one to be held responsible for Charlie's actions.

"How have you been living with him and haven't killed him yet?!"

Knox throws his hands up in surrender.

"Don't look at me, I'm Switzerland, here."

Chapter Notes

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Once again, I am seriously blown away and touched at the patience everyone has showed me in this re-writing process. Seriously, I cannot thank you all enough. BUT, hopefully some of the new scene additions to this chapter make up for the time it has taken me to upload this chapter.

PS- Shoutout to my new friend on tumblr, @achillesunly, who. I am completely in debt to after they beta-read this chapter for me. Seriously, you are the best <3

Knox leans back against the small loveseat in his living room, staring down at the blank Google Doc in front of him as if it has personally

offended him. He has his final paper due for the Imperialism summer course he is taking, but he doesn't exactly have his heart in it.

About a week has passed since Knox's insanely awkward run-in with Chris at Trader Joe's, and to Knox's surprise, Charlie hasn't brought up what happened once. No lewd jokes about being his 'boyfriend', no heckling about Chris and Chet, *nothing* . Instead, Charlie does what he always does, and continues living as if nothing happened.

Knox wants to move on from the situation as quickly as Charlie seems to, trying his hardest to bury himself into the rest of his summer coursework, yet his brain still is circling back on what had happened. He blatantly lied to someone who up until a few months ago was arguably the most important person in his entire life.

Shit, Knox didn't just lie about dating someone who was a stranger to her; he had lied about being in a relationship with his *best friend* , of all people. It's heartbreaking to realize now that they're broken up, he doesn't technically owe Chris anything anymore, so he *should* be able to laugh the situation off and not feel too guilty.

But God help him, Knox still does. He *hates* lying; not only because he is terrible at it, but because it's just- *wrong* .

I'll just tell her if I ever run into her again that we had some kind of freak breakup or something , Knox decides, slamming his laptop shut so he can focus his full attention on the *Seinfeld* episode that has been playing as background noise. It's one of Knox's favorites; the one where Kramer gets banned from his favorite fruit shop in the city and makes Jerry shop for him, only for Jerry to get banned himself.

The sound of his phone vibrating on the coffee table pulls Knox out of his stupor, and he makes a grab for it in time to see a series of messages popping up on his phone from the Discord chat he has with his best friends. As he scans through the messages, a wide grin begins to spread across his face.

The Dead Poets Society

11:41 am

Neil

Good gentlemen of the group chat! Guess who is back? ;)

Meeks

I am going to go on a wild winger here and say it's you.

Pitts

About time. Meeks and I just got in a few days ago. How about you guys?

Cameron

I got in last night.

Todd

I have been here for a few days now. Jeffrey came to the city to visit with his fiance and I'm at the airport seeing them off.

Neil

Perfect! To celebrate this joyous occasion, how about we all meet at Bus Stop Diner to celebrate? Say, 8:30?

Pitts

Ah hell yeah, the band is getting back together

* *Gif of dancing Russian kid at the nightclub with sunglasses* *

Neil

Knox and Nuwanda are being MIA

Neil

Guys?

Neil

Blink twice if you are getting these

Cameron

Maybe Knox finally killed Charlie

Pitts

Wouldn't you *wish*

Letting out a loud laugh at the last message, Knox gets up off the couch and wanders down the hallway in search of his roommate.

“Hey, did you see the messages-” he starts, but he stops short when he sees Charlie in their shared bathroom, a leg kicked up on the sink counter and his jaw clenching in concentration as he is shaving one of his legs. Something Knox never knew about Charlie until moving in with him is he always shaves his legs for soccer. When Pitts started giggling about it one day, Charlie had said it was because it made moving around during both practices and games easier.

He also said it hurt like a bitch to try ripping a bandage off with hair on your legs, too, so Knox never really questioned him much on it.

As if sensing Knox’s hovering in the doorway, Charlie halts his movements and looks over his shoulder to throw Knox a well-perfected eyebrow raise.

“Let’s be honest here, Knoxious,” he says, unfazed as he shifts over and starts working on his other leg. “This is *not* the weirdest thing you’ve caught me doing.”

Images of walking in on Charlie with that girl at the St. Patrick’s Day Party earlier this year makes Knox cough, a light flush creeping up his neck.

“Oh Jesus, don’t remind me,” he shudders. “It’s just- do you *have* to shave your legs in our sink?”

“Fuck, you sound just like Cameron,” Charlie grumbles. “If I knew this was what I was going to be in for when I agreed to move in with you, I would’ve moved in with Cameron's sorry ass a third year.”

“You wouldn’t dare, you love my cooking,” Knox teases with a grin, leaning up against the doorway to the bathroom. “Besides, if you really want to move back in with Cameron, you can tell him yourself; the guys want us to meet them at the Bus Stop Diner tonight.”

No sooner do the words leave Knox’s mouth that the razor in Charlie’s hands clatters into the sink, forgotten, as Charlie lets out a whoop.

“Fucking FINALLY!” he hollers out, punching the air in his state of excitement. “The Poets are BACK, baby!”

Knox shakes his head as he watches Charlie dramatically collapse onto one of the couches in their living room, smiling at his enthusiasm.

He opens his mouth to warn Charlie about not getting too loud when, right on schedule, a series of loud bangs on the wall at the far side of the apartment ring out, making them fall silent.

Knox doesn't even have to think twice to know the culprit behind the loud banging is Nolan; a grumpy old hermit who has had it out for Knox and Charlie since the two of them moved into their apartment. During their few months of residency at the apartment, Knox hasn't learnt much about Nolan, except that he loves voicing his frustration by banging on the shared wall of their apartments whenever Charlie and Knox get a little too loud.

And if the current loud bangs are anything to go by, Nolan isn't pleased with them by any means.

Charlie rolls his eyes, unfazed by the loud banging at this point.

"Oh, fuck off, Nolan!" he hollers, projecting his voice loud enough to be heard through their shared wall. In retaliation for the sudden string of noise, Charlie picks up one of his stray Vans off the floor and throws it at the wall.

Miraculously, the banging stops.

"One of these days Nolan is going to come over here and kick our asses," Knox laughs. On TV, Jerry Seinfeld is on the receiving end of Joe the fruit store owner's wrath.

Charlie turns and fixes Knox with a look of faux innocence.

"That decrepit coward? Oh, please, Knoxious. Nolan is a wuss. Knocking is as far as he gets and you know it."

As much as Knox wants to say he had a productive rest of his afternoon until he and Charlie started making their way into the city to meet their friends, that would be a huge fucking lie.

Procrastination is a hell of a drug, after all.

Instead of taking Knox's car into the city, they make the joint decision of taking one of the subways out of the White Plains train station close to their apartment, because Knox has had a staunch refusal of ever

driving in New York City during rush hour ever since Freshman year when Pitts' electric BMW died in the middle of traffic on their way back from Montauk and it took NYPD a half hour to show up on the scene of their humiliation.

During the train ride, Charlie plays music off his phone, having declared himself DJ the second they sat down. Knox allows him to do so, on the condition that he can pick the music on the way home, which is how he gets stuck with the greatest hits of Seattle Grunge blaring in his ear.

By the time the train screeches into the Harlem 125th station, Knox is certain he's gone deaf in his left ear.

"I think you made me deaf in my left ear," Knox accesses petulantly.

Charlie just tips his head back and laughs as he snags the Airpod out of Knox's ear.

"It's not my fault you have the music taste of an eighty-year-old man and can't handle listening to Soundgarden," he laughs.

Knox glowers at him and reaches out to slap Charlie on the forearm, which does nothing but make him laugh *harder* , the fucking asshole.

They don't rush off right away like the other passengers when the subway doors stutter open. Instead, they loiter around in the back as they people-watch the swarm of New Yorkers trying to rush off the subway until they're the last two remaining on the train. Heaving their backpacks over their shoulders, Knox and Charlie take up the tail end of the group.

As soon as Knox steps onto the bustling platform, the first thing that hits him is the smell; a dizzying combination of garbage, smog, and street food he's grown to miss whenever he is away, but still makes him wrinkle his nose all the same when stepping back into the confines of Manhattan.

Charlie stands a little on his tip-toes, scanning over the heads of some of the taller subway passengers until a look of recognition makes way for a rare smile across his face.

"There they are!" he hollers, gesturing to Knox's right.

Knox follows the line of Charlie's fingers to see their welcome committee of five, huddled together near the steps that lead down to

the bustling city street below.

“Guys, over here!” Charlie says with a wave of his hands.

At once, all five heads swivel over in the direction of Charlie’s yelling, and wide smiles similar to Charlie’s own stretch across their faces.

“Nuwanda! Overstreet! My beautiful, beautiful boys!” Neil greets enthusiastically, somehow managing to be heard over the commotion. From his right, Meeks and Pitts are now starting to wave them over, while Todd just shakes his head and smiles from where he is standing on Neil’s left, holding his hand. A few feet away from the huddle is Cameron, who has his neck craned down at his phone in an attempt to try disassociating from the obnoxious group, yet there is still a wide, rare smile across his face all the same.

While Knox slowly weaves through the crowd, Charlie rams through them like a bull in a China shop, almost taking an old lady down with him as he makes a beeline toward Neil.

“Oh, Perry, bless my heart, I’ve missed you!” he cries out in such an outlandish voice Knox cannot help but laugh. He watches the scene fondly as Charlie all but jumps in Neil’s arms, Neil barely managing to drop Todd’s hand before the two of them almost collapse onto the ground in a giggling heap.

Grinning, Knox wraps his arms around the first person of the group, who turns out to be Meeks, and the two of them sway back and forth before Pitts and Todd join their hug. Cameron stands there for a few seconds, mortified at the inevitable scene they're all causing, before caving in and limply wrapping his arms around Todd and Pitt’s shoulders.

Savoring the moment, Knox closes his eyes and grins, the old lady who Charlie almost knocked over glaring at them be damned.

Over his past two years at Columbia, Knox has grown to become so reliant on these guys. Not only did they help him through his first month of college anxiety being away from everyone he knew, but they also were supportive of him in his decision to change his major from pre-law to history and social studies education, as well as a monumental breakup.

How Knox scraped by before meeting these guys is an absolute *miracle.*

Their calm and peaceful group hug gets eradicated the moment Charlie and Neil realize there is a group hug going on they are being left out of. The force of Charlie jumping onto Knox's back and tugging on his Patagonia backpack causes him to tumble over with a yelp, dragging Todd and Pitts down with him.

Knox doesn't entirely understand how it happens, but before he knows it, all seven of them are lying in a heap of limbs on the filthy subway floor, groaning and cursing. Knox manages to retract himself from the pile without getting hit. Cameron, unfortunately, isn't as lucky and gets elbowed in the chin by Charlie in Charlie's attempts at getting off the ground. Knox has the sneaking suspicion Charlie elbowed Cameron in the face intentionally and gives Charlie a pointed look, only to be met with an impish-looking grin in return that makes Knox bite on his lip to suppress a laugh.

Once everyone is standing, they head out.

"How was your summer, slick?" Neil asks Charlie as the group bounds down the steps, reaching out to ruffle at his childhood best friend's hair.

"Keen," Charlie says with a roll of his eyes, garnering snorts from the group. "Cape Cod is just as quiet, insufferable, and full of snobby rich people as it was when I was last there. My parents were off in Venice for a majority of the time before Knoxious and I moved into our apartment, so I didn't have to put up with them for very long, thank fucking God."

"I cannot believe you grew up in Cape Cod," Cameron sighs, sounding a mix of awestruck and envious. "The Kennedys all lived there, so it has to be nice."

"I would literally give up one of my kidneys if it meant I never had to go back."

Cameron sends a narrow-eyed look at Charlie in response.

"How about you, Knox?" Neil asks loudly, attempting to push off the inevitable that is Charlie and Cameron's constant bickering. "How was your summer?"

Knox swallows awkwardly under the six unrelenting stares he is now on the receiving end of.

"Yeah, living with Dalton isn't for the faint of heart, you know."

Meeks teases with a gentle nudge.

Knox shrugs, completely helpless as he tries to fish for words.

Except for Knox and Neil, everyone else in their friend group comes from extremely wealthy families. So, while all his friends spent their summer breaks in foreign countries, Knox often spent his time at his childhood home in New Haven with his family. They're not exactly poor, by any means. His father is a lawyer, after all.

But in comparison to the rest of his friends, Knox felt a lot like an orphan in a Charles Dickens novel.

"It was alright," Knox settles on.

"Just alright?" Pitts grins.

"Come on, there has to be more to your summer than that!" Neil shakes Knox's shoulder heartily at the same time Charlie sends a look in Meeks' direction and says, "Come on, I'm not that terrible to live with."

Charlie's complaint falls on deaf ears to everyone except Cameron, who makes a point of turning around from where he is leading the group to chime in with a, "I full-heartedly disagree."

Charlie's eyes narrow further, before his signature "I'm about to fuck with Cameron *hardcore* " expression takes over.

He lets out a loud sneeze, but instead of covering his nose, he dramatically directs it at Cameron.

Cameron practically clams up at the contact the sneeze has against his back and is silent for a few moments before letting out a screech of frustration that echoes comically in the near-empty streets.

"You're so disgusting!" he all but shrieks, pushing back at Charlie, who is throwing his head back and laughing too much to take the assault seriously. Cameron then looks over his shoulder and shoots a withering look at Knox. As if *he* is the one to be held responsible for Charlie's actions. " *How* have you been living with him and haven't killed him yet?"

Knox throws his hands up in surrender.

"Don't look at me, I'm Switzerland here."

“Well, *Switzerland* ,” Pitts snorts. “Can you tell us how your summer was without giving us that “alright” shit?”

“Other than catching up on summer classes and moving into my apartment, it was *alright* ,” Knox says with a roll of his eyes. “If there is anything I had to divulge, you guys would be the first to know.”

For the rest of their walk towards the diner, conversations about the other poet's summers carry the group all the way to their window-booth near the back of the restaurant, with Cameron’s outlandish stories of the various celebrity encounters he had over the past summer coming to a comedic close as they all take their respective seats.
Knox nods politely while their waitress for this evening- Jenny, ironically enough- lists off all of the daily specials, despite already knowing he is going to be ordering his usual; a double bacon cheeseburger with fries and a Cherry Cola.

While Neil turns toward the group after she walks away to begin excitedly telling them about the part he’s trying to grab for Juilliard's upcoming production The Flick- a Pulitzer Prize winning play about the daily life of movie theater employees- Knox turns to Todd.

“So, what classes are you taking this semester?” Knox bends his head down and asks, and an internal part of him grins at the way the tension immediately leaves Todd’s shoulders at the question.

Aside from Charlie, Todd is probably the member of his friend group Knox is the closest to. He was the last person to join their friend group, the six of them all meeting Todd as one of the New York University student speakers at a poetry open mike Neil dragged them to a month and half-into freshman year. When they first met him, Todd hardly kept eye contact and would often whisper responses whenever Knox or any of the guys would gently prod him into participating in conversation. Knox had seen a lot of his middle school and early high school self in Todd, though, so Knox was able to find a niche and click with him, while Charlie’s boisterous attempts at getting Todd out of his shell were met with red cheeks and nervous stuttering.

Todd has come a long way since that poetry night a couple years ago, undoubtedly as a byproduct of being around people who encouraged his hobbies and interests, as opposed to his parents who often ignored Todd in favor of his older brother Jeffrey.

To say Knox felt like a proud older brother would be a complete understatement.

“I-I got into a senior Jane Austen seminar, so I’m really excited about that,” he starts. Knox nods his head at Todd encouragingly. “Also a senior seminar about written Epics.”

“Hey, congratulations,” Knox grins, knocking his shoulder against Todd’s, earning him a shy yet accomplished smile in response. “You’re touching on *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost,* I take it?”

Todd nods his head and absentmindedly starts picking at one of the stray napkins on the countertop.

“Homer, too.”

“Naturally.”

Todd lets out a quiet snort.

“What about you, what classes are you taking?”

“I’m in catch up mode right now, which is annoying, so I’m taking the max amount of credits this semester,” Knox practically groans. When he had told his younger brother on the phone a few days ago he was planning on taking twenty credits on top of his TA job this semester, his brother laughed and called him an idiot right to his face. “I’m taking the history senior seminar on archival research, microeconomics, a couple history classes about comparative genocide and European fascism, and then I am taking a Dimensions of American Ed. Studies class.”

When mentioning the Dimensions of American Ed. Studies Class, Pitts’ eyes lighten up from where he is across the table.

“Ay, no shit!” he exclaims excitedly. “I signed up for that class as a filler to satisfy a requirement. We can be Dimensions of American Ed. Studies Study Buddies!”

From where he is sitting on Pitts’ left, Meeks lets out a snort.

“That is a mouthful,” he says, but not unkindly, moving some of the silverware around to make way for their drinks that just arrived. “Why do the humanities have such long class titles? The STEM courses just get right to the point.”

Pitts raises his Dr. Pepper in the air like he is making a toast to the Gods.

“Amen to that, I say.”

The food doesn’t take long to arrive and as usual, the Bus Stop Diner doesn’t disappoint; Knox’s burger is cooked to perfection, and his fries even have a slight crunch to them.

The food would’ve been even better, however, if Charlie would knock it off and stop stealing his fries.

“Who are you kidding, Meeks,” Charlie is saying as he reaches out, trying to snag the sixth or seventh fry off of Knox’s plate. “The world would benefit from having a teacher like me and you know it.”

Knox takes another bite of his burger, albeit a little too aggressively, and tries to focus on how good the food is. The effort turns out to be in vain. Because dammit, if Charlie wanted fries, he should’ve ordered his own and quit panhandling off of Knox’s plate.

“I would be terrified to have you as a teacher.”

“Come on, Meeksie, I think you’re being insensible to my capabilities, here.”

Charlie slides the milkshake across the table at Meeks, shaking it demonstratively as if the proposition of chocolate ice cream was going to help Meeks in changing his mind.

It doesn’t, as Meeks wrinkles his nose down at the frosted glass, and Charlie would have had better luck in convincing Meeks if-

“You do remember I am vegan, right?”

Charlie makes an undefined hand gesture with *another one of Knox’s fries.*

“I thought you would have come to the light and quit,” he says, throwing the fry into his mouth. “Same with Cameron and his celiac.”

Cameron- who looked like he had been having an engaged-looking conversation with Todd- immediately brings their conversation to a stand still to snap his head over in Charlie’s direction.

And-

Jesus Christ, here they go again.

“How many times do I have to tell you, Charlie, I can’t control having celiac disease.”

“It’s a fake-ass disease is what it is-”

“It’s a real medical condition!” he hollers out, unabashed. A few of the other patrons in the restaurant are looking over at their table to hear the source of the yelling. From across the table, Neil and Pitts are staring at the playing out argument gleefully. Todd is biting down on his fist to try to smother his grin. Meeks just looks like he is praying for the restaurant owner to kick them all out. “Millions of people die from it every year.”

“Now that just sounds like a down-right *lie* .”

And it’s right there, as Charlie reaches out for the ninth fry on his plate, that Knox reaches his breaking point.

“Get your own damn fries, Dalton,” he snaps, making an avid point of slapping Charlie’s hand away and eating his recently rescued fry.

Charlie stares at him for a moment, blinking owlishly at the sudden turn of events.

Then, just as quickly, a sinister-looking smirk stretches across his lips that makes Knox contemplate all of his life decisions.

“Now, babe,” he says with an air of faux innocence. “That is no way to treat your *boyfriend* , is it?”

The question makes Knox choke on his sip of Cherry Cola.

Everyone at the table has similar reactions; Cameron’s jaw drops so low that his uneaten bite of eggs tumbles out of his mouth. Todd’s eyes bug out of his head, glancing in between Charlie and Knox with a look of bewilderment. Neil sets his chin in his palm, a smug and accomplished look on his face as he hoots out his congratulations along with Meeks and Pitts. And then Charlie, the creator of this chaos, kicks his feet up on the table, winking at Knox from where he’s sitting on his left as he snags the last fry off the plate.

They all compose themselves to chorus their praise when the waitress

comes over to ask how their meals are, sickeningly sweet smiles on their faces. Yet the second she turns around to go to another table, everyone falls right back into character and returns to their various states of disbelief.

Knox shoves Charlie's feet off the table, practically fuming.

"You little- *we are not dating* ." he hisses through gritted teeth.

Charlie shrugs, seemingly unfazed. "Yeah, we're not," he admits. Eyes practically glinting, he adds, "But Chris thinks we are."

All of the guys turn towards Knox, staring at him with incredulous looks on their faces, while Knox wishes he could walk into the Hudson River and never be found *again* .

You've gotta be-

"Dalton, you got some explaining to do." Pitts says, shaking his head and failing in his attempts to not start cracking up.

"Charlie-" Knox warns. It comes like a plea more than anything.

"So last week, Knoxious and I were out at Trader Joe's-"

"Charlie, don't-"

"And we ran into Chris and her new, piece of homophobic shit boyfriend Chet Danbury-"

"Charlie, I am literally begging you-"

"So we pretended to date so it made it look like Knoxious wasn't single."

Crickets chirp for a moment or two. Then, the guys erupt in such loud laughter it draws the unwanted attention of everyone in the diner. Knox hunches over, hoping that maybe he would blend in with the formica of the table somehow.

"If it makes you feel better, Knoxious, Chris totally downgraded," Charlie reaches out and ruffles his hair. Knox doesn't have it in him to smack his hand away. "He can go eat a football."

"Yeah, the guy seems like a real jerk." Pitts adds helpfully. He shoots a warning look around the table when he thinks Knox isn't looking. The other guys begin shouting out their agreement. Knox knows they all

mean well, but he still can't help but feel dejected and hopelessly single.

As soon as their dinner wraps up and the checks are accounted for, Charlie loudly declares he has plans for what they are doing for the rest of the evening, resulting in everyone to slowly follow Charlie through the streets and onto subways, sharing confused looks with one another behind Charlie's back.

It's not until they are deep into Washington Square Park that Charlie turns around towards the group.

"Tada!" he hollers, flourishing his hands extravagantly.

Knox stares. And *stares*, because-

"Charlie, wha-what are we supposed to be looking at?" Todd asks, his eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

When Charlie said he had plans, Knox expected Charlie to lead them to some club, or even the new roller rink that had opened up in Brooklyn over the summer he wouldn't stop lamenting about checking out. Knox was *not* expecting the Giuseppe Garibaldi statue in Washington Square Park to be their final destination for their plans this evening.

"It's the Garibaldi Statue." Cameron says bluntly, and Knox has to fight the urge to roll his eyes.

"Jesus, Cameron, for someone who goes to an Ivy League school, you sure can be an idiot sometimes," Charlie says, not holding back from rolling his eyes as Knox had. "I didn't take us all the way to Greenwich to stare at some old statue. I brought us to Greenwich for *this."*

Knox eyes the area Charlie gestures to near his feet.

And-

No. No, no, no, there was no way in hell-

"Charlie, I don't believe I have to even say this, but I think going into the city sewers is a terrible idea."

Normally, Cameron's unease would result in a bunch of groans of agitation or curses. This time, everyone stays uncharacteristically

silent as they watch Charlie begin to fiddle with the heavy sewer lid with a crowbar he retrieved from his backpack. Because, for quite possibly the first time ever, everyone is siding with Richard Cameron on something instead of Charlie.

In the face of everyone's concern, Charlie doesn't seem deterred in the slightest.

"Lighten up, would you? This is our first weekend back together for the school year, we gotta do something *big.* " Charlie manages to shimmy the sewer lid out of place with a satisfied hum, and Knox flinches as the lid loudly clashes against the concrete. "Besides, Cameron, the very fact that you oppose this makes me think I'm onto something."

Knox half expects cops to jump out of the surrounding bushes and ambush them, but the bushes remain eerily still. He goes on to watch Charlie pull out a headlamp and begin the process of strapping it on, and it's the sight of how ridiculous Charlie looks with the damn thing strapped to his head that is the final straw for him.

"Drop the sewer lid, Seinfeld, we are *not following you down there."*

When Charlie turns to Knox, he has the audacity to look wounded.

"Knoxious, you too?! After the many trials and tribulations we've been through, you still betray me? Baby, I'm hurt!"

Knox rolls his eyes as he stuffs his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Please don't call me baby."

" *Baby* ," Charlie over enunciates in retaliation, quickly giving Knox a well-practiced wink as a form of farewell before he begins to make his way down the rusty ladder.

Knox glances over at Todd, who is glancing back at Knox, to spare him from Charlie's incessant wrath. They both snap their heads to Meeks, who looks like he is about to shove Charlie off the ladder and spare them all.

Neil is the one who budges.

"Nuwanda, come on!" Neil hollers down. There's an easy-going smile on his face, but Knox can tell Neil is just as nervous as the rest of them. "You're gonna have to get a tetanus shot if you go down there and we refuse to take you to the hospital!"

Charlie ignores him and continues making his way down the rungs.

Cameron pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Charlie, this is absolutely ridiculous, come on.”

“Oh give me a fucking break, Cameron!” he hollers back, his voice echoing. If it wasn’t for the headlamp Charlie had secured onto his head, Knox wouldn’t have been able to see him. He doesn’t have any idea how far down Charlie is at this point, but he is starting to look more and more like a speck of light brown hair by the second.. “It’s not like my toes are gonna get chlamydia or anything by coming in contact with sewer water.”

“I mean, you might,” Meeks grumbles from somewhere behind Knox, always willing to stick it to Charlie when Knox isn’t in the mood to. “You’re going to go down there the same but I wouldn’t be surprised if you come out as a mutant."

Cameron and Pitts let out matching snorts as Charlie snaps his head up. Knox has to squint through the bright light to catch sight of the look of agitation on his face.

“Look, this is our last weekend together before college starts up. So if you all wanna be pussies like Cameron, fine, be my fucking guest. *I’m* going down.”

Knox holds his hands up, an act of surrender and an extended olive branch Knox hopes and pleads to the lord Charlie will accept.

"Jesus Christ, Charlie, calm down," he lets out a defeated sigh. “Just please come up before you fall and break something?”

To Knox’s surprise, instead of putting up an argument, Charlie actually listens to him and starts making his way back up.

Cameron petulantly kicks at a rock.

“Of course *you* he listens to.” he grumbles.

Knox frowns at him in confusion.

“What do you mean he listens to *me?”*

“He *always* listens to you,” Pitts rolls his eyes, skewing the tie he is wearing. “It’s kind of annoying, actually.”

Knox opens his mouth to bite back that Charlie certainly does *not* listen to him, but their conversation falls short when Charlie emerges from the sewer, shooting them all an icy glare as he does so.

“Well, do you geniuses have any other ideas?” he asks, loudly closing the sewer lid behind him as he comes to a stand.

The question spurs everyone into looking at Neil, undoubtedly the leader of their little friend group.

He stands there with his face scrunched up for a few moments, deep in thought, before a wide grin takes over his face.

“City Hall Loop.”

Ticket to Ride

Chapter Summary

To Knox's surprise, while Charlie does perk up at the thrill jumping off the train is going to cause, there is a pinch to his face that takes Knox a few moments to realize is concern.

"Okay, I'm all down and for jumping off a moving subway car, that sounds fucking bad ass. But you do realize we have Fumblestreet here with us, right?"

Charlie's reference to the aforementioned nickname has all of his friends turning towards him. Knox flushes under the weight of their stares, because as much as he wants to adamantly deny it, his reputation as the group klutz precedes him; when comparing the amount of injuries Knox has incurred over his twenty-year life span to the injuries of all six of his friends put together, Knox's injuries surpass all theirs by a terrifying margin.

Cameron gestures demonstratively at Knox.

"All the more reason not to do it. "

"We already voted on it, we're not backing out," Pitts says firmly. "As long as Neil brought bubble wrap along for Knox, we'll be fine."

Immediately, all of the apprehension Knox feels dissipates. He clenches his jaw tightly.

"Let's fucking do it."

Chapter Notes

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My author's note from four years ago still stands true; I do NOT know New York City geogrpahy or how the subway systems entirely work. So again, to my NYC readers out here, I'm sorry well in advance.

As always, thank you all for reading <3 Ali

Knox guesses he should explain the obsession with going into abandoned buildings.

Back in their first semester, Charlie got everyone turned on to the idea of going into abandoned buildings- urban exploration- as an opportunity to escape the usually crowded areas of New York City for their Dead Poets Society meetings. In addition, going into abandoned buildings had a thrill to it; seeing these usually blocked off areas and uncovering places otherwise forgotten by history really fit into the "sucking the marrow out of life" and "living deliberately" mottos their friend group had come to embrace.

As the pre-law turned history major of the friend group, Knox quickly became tasked with doing the research on abandoned places in the city for them to explore for their meetings; Columbia has an entire section in their vast historical archives dedicated to abandoned places, which is how Knox came across City Hall Station in the first place.

At one point it served as the original southern terminal station for one of the first New York subway lines back in the early twentieth century, that inevitably became a product of time when people began using the Brooklyn Bridge Station right down the road. It has laid abandoned since the end of World War Two, with security only coming down to do periodic checks on the place to see if it is structurally stable.

Which naturally made it an ideal place to go investigate.

"Aren't we a little too old to be running around subway tunnels?" Or at least, everyone except Cameron tended to be on board with exploring abandoned places, but still came along anyway, complaining all the while and oftentimes almost getting an aneurysm as a result.

Knox finds himself groaning along with the rest of the guys.

"You've seriously gotta be shitting-"

"We can still do the tour of City Hall Loop through the New York Transit Museum," Cameron persists over Charlie's complaints, most likely feeling emboldened from everyone siding with him earlier over the sewer incident. "I looked it up the other day, it's only fifty dollars to go on."

Neil- who is leading the charge out of Washington Square Park- spins

around to face Cameron.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asks with a grin, raising his eyebrows teasingly.

Save for the streetlights, it is now completely dark outside, yet Knox can still see the way Neil’s eyes are practically twinkling with mischief. It is at times like these Knox wonders how Neil and Charlie went to the same boarding school without accidentally burning that place to the fucking ground.

Almost instantaneously, Cameron’s confident composure deflates on the spot and gets replaced with something a lot more akin to vexation, and Knox can practically see the realization playing across his face that he is about to get overruled yet again.

“There isn’t any fun in that,” Charlie scoffs and makes a point of aiming the pebble he has been kicking down the sidewalk for the past few minutes at Cameron’s shoes. “You could take all the excitement out of a fucking earthquake just by showing up. Besides, what’s the worst trouble we can possibly get into, anyway?”

“Uh- trespassing, breaking and entering, reckless endangerment,” Cameron is quick to list, counting each public offense off on his fingers. “God knows what else.”

“Is literally all you do complain?!”

Cameron lets out a frustrated sigh in response to the drawn-out noise Charlie lets out.

“It’s not complaining,” he says, which totally sounds like something someone who is complaining would say. “I’m just being precautious, is all.”

Charlie lets out an exaggerated cough at that, barely hiding the way he chokes out “kiss ass” in the midst of his fake coughing-fit.

Cameron turns towards Charlie, affronted.

“What was that?” he demands sharply.

Charlie, always one to take the bait when it comes to antagonizing Cameron, smirks, all challenging teeth and mirth.

“Kiss-ass,” he over enunciates, and Meeks lets out an annoyed noise

from where he is standing next to Todd.

“Why the hell am I always considered to be the “kiss ass” of the group when Knox is a TA?” Cameron asks, and the mention of his name makes Knox snap *his* head up from the conversation he is about to start with Pitts. “But does anyone say anything about *him* being a kiss ass? No!”

Knox lips part in astonishment.

“What the- why do I always end up getting dragged in the middle of your arguments?”

“Guilty by association,” Cameron says, void of any hesitation, which is- such bullshit for so many reasons.

“Wait, haven’t you applied to be a TA before?” Pitts asks, his eyebrows scrunching in confusion. “Can’t really use that as a basis of argument here.”

Knox presses his lips tightly together, trying his hardest not to verbally kill Cameron since Pitts is leaping to his defense. It turns out he doesn’t have to, as Charlie is already beating him to it.

“Yes he did, Pittsie. He’s just jealous because Knoxious got approached about being a TA at the end of his *freshman year* and he has been trying to haggle the Economics Department into hiring his ass and has been declined every single time.”

“Okay, this conversation is getting *way* off topic,” Meeks- his other savior- chimes in, cushioning the conversation so Neil can sweep in and fully return it to the matter at hand, which is-

“Come on, Cameron, this is City Hall Loop we’re talking about. City Hall Loop! We’ve been dreaming about going here for years now!”

Neils’ attempts at persuading Cameron end up going nowhere, as he crosses his arms over his chest and says, “I’m calling a vote.”

Another round of groans breaks out in response.

“Alright, alright!” Neil hollers out and gathers the group’s attention with a sharp whistle that sounds out in the almost sleeping city like a whip. “Who’s in?”

“I am,” Charlie says, instantaneously and void of any hesitation.

“Pittsie, how ‘bout you?”

“I’m in.”

“So am I,” Knox is quick to agree, trying his hardest not to glare too harshly in Cameron’s direction. “What else were we going to plan on doing, anyway?”

Meeks stands there a moment, pursing his lips as he shuffles on his feet before he too agrees to the idea.

“Todd?”

Cameron’s far outnumbered at this point, but everyone turns towards the final poet to speak anyway, anxiously awaiting his answer. Slowly, a smile spreads across his face, and Knox already knows his answer before he says anything.

“I think it would be a lot of fun.” he says, causing Neil to practically start beaming.

Charlie throws out his arms and lets out a cheer of victory. “Majority rules, Cameron!” he practically sings, because Charlie will forever be seven-years-old when it comes down to it.

Neil then takes off down the street, everyone following in step with a new sense of convocation.

Cameron- who is still in the process of begrudgingly admitting defeat- purses his lips and gives Knox a look.

Knox, not entirely over the snide comment earlier, shrugs simply.

“He’s not wrong,” he says, trying his hardest to feign innocence.

“Hurry it up!” Charlie hollers from where he is now a good ten feet ahead. “My great grandmother can move faster than you two!”

With a shake of his head, Knox picks up the pace, leaving Cameron in the dust so that he can grumble out his complaints to himself.

After roughly ten minutes of walking consisting of Todd and Neil chasing each other through the almost deserted streets, giggling to each other like mad, the Broadway-Lafayette Street Station comes into view. The sight of it makes Knox’s stomach swoop with anticipation, because holy fuck, this is it.

When reaching the mouth of the station entrance, Knox makes a run for it and slides down the rail dividing both sides of the steps, letting out an excited yell as he zooms past Meeks and Cameron, who were opting to walk down the steps. He jumps off the railing when nearing the bottom, stumbling, and turns around to fix Neil- who is now getting ready to slide down the rail himself- with a look.

“Which train do we go on?”

“Sixth! It’s the downtown one that spits you out by Leonard street!” he yells with a laugh, throwing his arms out to the sides in an effort to maintain balance as he sails down. He too jumps off the rail, with the grace and agility of someone who has done it many times. “We all make sure we stay on until we hit the Brooklyn Bridge Station.”

Knox nods and they make sure to side-step out of the way as a form of preparation to avoid getting trampled by Charlie, who is laughing as he too begins making his way down.

“Do a flip!” Neil yells at him, grinning.

“Do a backflip!” Knox encourages. “Pull all the stops.”

Charlie tumbles off the rail, way less graceful than either of them due to the surprised laugh that bubbles out of him. When he comes to a full stand he brushes imaginary dirt off his shoulder, the quick gesture making them laugh. Shortly after Charlie, Pitts comes sliding down and lays by them and then Todd- who Neil quickly catches to cover the brunt of what otherwise would have been an awkward fall. Once Cameron and Meeks reach the bottom of the steps, with variations of amusement on their faces, the group heads out, following Neil through the station and up another staircase to the sixth train platform.

As they navigate the station, they don’t end up encountering another soul, the only exception being an exasperated-looking metro worker who is watching them all scan their metro cards. By the looks of it, he doesn’t seem all too thrilled with having to listen to a bunch of obnoxious college students, and in the back of his head, Knox can’t help but feel a shred of sympathy for the guy.

After ten minutes of waiting, the subway finally pulls up, and other than Knox and his friends, the only person on the train is a man in his early thirties who is too busy head-nodding to the music blaring from his headphones to pay attention to the new inhabitants he is sharing the car with. As it would turn out, they don’t have to spend too much time with him, as he gets off at the very first stop, leaving just the

seven of them behind.

“Raisins?” Cameron asks, holding out the box of Sunmaid raisins he pulled out of his pocket towards Knox. Clearly this is some kind of truce for the comment about Knox being a kiss-ass earlier. He declines the raisins with a wave of his hand and turns to Neil. “So, how do we get to City Hall Loop from the Brooklyn Bridge Station?”

“Well, I did some digging-” Neil begins, grinning, and- yeah, okay, Knox does not like the look on his face *or* his tone one fucking bit.

“Never a good sign,” Meeks cuts in, leaning forward in his seat. “And?”

“And,” Neil echoes. “We have to stay on the train past the Brooklyn Bridge Station since the sixth train passes through the abandoned station when making the loop back around again.”

Everyone blinks as Neil in confusion; he is offering up explanations, but no solutions.

“In order to get to City Hall Loop we have to jump off the train to get onto the platform.”

He then does this little gesture with his hands to mime someone dropping off, which Knox has no idea how he is even supposed to react to.

All that comes out of his mouth is, “I’m sorry. *What?* ”

Todd scoots away from Neil, an incredulous look on his face. “I very much want to reiterate Knox’s *what* , here.”

“I concur.” Meeks says with a raise of his hand.

A guilty look flashes across Neil’s face as he reaches for Todd’s hand.

“There’s train sensors all along the tracks, so we can’t walk there,” he says, rubbing at the knuckle of Todd’s pointer finger in a touch of reassurance. “If we minimize our time walking, we have less of a chance of getting caught.”

“So we are going from vetoing Charlie’s attempts at becoming chemically mutated in the city sewers to instead jumping off of the subway?” Meeks asks. “Am I hearing that correctly?”
“More or less.” Neil smiles.

An unsettled silence falls over them. While this is something they all have been wanting to do, binding themselves to the majority vote taken earlier, this is way beyond anything any of them ever attempted before.

To Knox's surprise, while Charlie does perk up at the thrill jumping off the train is going to cause, there is a pinch to his face that takes Knox a few moments to realize is concern.

"Okay, I'm all down and for jumping off a moving subway car, that sounds fucking bad ass. But you *do* realize we have Fumblestreet here with us, right?"

Charlie's reference to the aforementioned nickname has all of his friends turning towards him. Knox flushes under the weight of their stares, because as much as he wants to adamantly deny it, his reputation as the group klutz precedes him; when comparing the amount of injuries Knox has incurred over his twenty-year life span to the injuries of all six of his friends put together, Knox's injuries surpass all theirs by a terrifying margin.

Cameron gestures demonstratively at Knox.

"All the more reason not to do it. "

"We already voted on it, we're not backing out," Pitts says firmly. "As long as Neil brought bubble wrap along for Knox, we'll be fine." Immediately, all of the apprehension Knox feels dissipates. He clenches his jaw tightly.

"Let's fucking do it."

"Of course," Cameron grumbles. More loudly, he asks, "Do I have to remind you about Bucket Gate? Is this something you really should be doing?"

Though Cameron means well, Knox wants to let out a scream.

"Everyone will be reminding me of Bucket Gate until I'm on my deathbed, so no, I don't need the reminder."

They're on the subway for roughly an hour when the Brooklyn Bridge Station comes into view, and when the subway comes to a stop, Knox clambers down along with the rest of the poets to make sure they aren't spotted by any potential metro employees passing by on their

nightly rounds. Swallowing thickly, Knox waits in anticipation as the subway doors shakily open, making sure to stay as still as possible to not alert anyone of his presence.

While staying on the train past the final stop isn't exactly illegal, per se, the metro police has a history of being fucking ruthless. Knox would know; a couple months back, he got fined twenty dollars just for kicking his feet up against the subway seats on his commute back to the apartment because there was a stupid law under Section 1050.7 that considers using a seat for a foot rest with no one else occupying it "disorderly conduct."

Out of the corner of his eye, Neil and Charlie are glaring at each other, practically laying down on top of each other in their haste to scramble onto the subway floor.

"Fucking hell, Neil, quit pinching at my foot."

"Sitting down here ain't exactly ideal when the foot in question is digging into my ribcage, Dalton."

Meeks sends them a pointed look, lifting his finger to quietly shush them, which brings the loud whisper-yelling argument occuring down to a disgruntled-sounding grumbling as they shuffle away from one another.

Knox honestly cannot tell how long they all have been crouching beneath the subway windows, if it was fifteen minutes or only five. Regardless, the subway doors come to an electronic close before the train starts moving, signaling that they are in the clear.

Knox leans his neck back against the seat, letting out a deep breath in an attempt to calm his tremoring heart.

The first person Knox is able to catch eyes with is Todd, who is looking just about how Knox is feeling at the moment. Wide-eyed, Todd shakes his head at Knox in disbelief, mouthing an incredulous "what the fuck" at him which makes Knox laugh as they all come to a stand.

"Saddle up, boys," Charlie says as he heaves himself off the floor, smirking his way towards the side door that transitions between subway cars. As he passes by Knox, he squeezes his shoulders in a fleeting movement. "It's go time."

Cameron shoots a glare at Charlie's retreating back.

“If I end up breaking something, it’s your fault.”

Charlie whips his head around to shoot Cameron an equally unimpressed look.

“How would your incompetence be *my* fault? ” he questions. “If a bird so much as even shit on your car, you would find some fucked up way to blame me.”

"The market provides, Charlie, what can I say.”

Charlie’s eyes narrow considerably at the reference to the economic theory, but before he can comment on it, Neil calls from where he is trying to get the dividing doors open, “Nuwanda, Meeks, a little help here?”

The summon from Neil makes Charlie hurry towards the door, which is automatically locked as a result of the train being in motion. While Charlie sets to work with his lock-breaking skills and Meeks is looking over the series of complicated looking buttons, Knox squints at the faded sign above the compartment door Charlie is trying to jimmy the lock on.

Warning: do not move between cars.

Knox lets out a wry snort, the irony not being lost on him.

Despite working against a rapidly approaching clock, Meeks manages to press a button to trick the subway slide open for him seemingly on command, and Charlie nods his head towards the door in a silent encouragement for everyone to get a move on.

Once everyone is gathered up in a huddle, Neil slowly looks around at them.

"Alright, we are going to have to be quick about this since we only have such a limited amount of time to jump off and there are seven of us. Now, let’s fucking do this thing, shall we?”

With an encouraging clap, Neil cautiously makes the walk between the cars, holding his arms out to ensure he is maintaining his balance. Skillfully, he manages to hoist himself up onto the steel dividing gates between the subway cars with the help of the handrails on either side of the train.

Knox can hear Todd swallow nervously from next to him, and Knox

watches the way Todd's face pales as his boyfriend sways on the gates along with the movements of the train.

"Please don't fall and kill yourself," he calls softly. "I kind of want you to live until graduation."

The sound of Todd's voice immediately grabs Neil's attention, making him beam down at Todd with a look of such fondness it makes Knox feel self-conscious.

"Todd Anderson, I live for you."

Cutting through the romantic moment like steel, a loud screeching sound fills the air due to the subway taking a sharp corner.

"Here it comes." Pitts murmurs from somewhere behind Knox.

Cringing through the spine-chilling noise, Knox manages to peer his head around the doorframe just in time to catch his first glimpse of the station. The circular ceilings, glass skylight, and artfully-made chandeliers lighting the station are the first sights that greet him, looking nothing like anything found around the city today.

And then, before Knox can properly take it all in, Neil flashes a wide, excited grin over his shoulder as the only sort of heads up, before he leaps off the train and onto the platform.
He manages to time the jump perfectly so he lands on his feet, making the whole thing look effortless in a way only Neil Perry ever can.

As soon as it settles in that someone else has to be the next man on deck, Charlie is quick to break out of his stupor and climb up on the divider in the same way Neil has, his hair whipping around in the breeze as he peers out at the station.

"Let's rock n' roll, buckaroo!" he hollers out, and with a final wink over his shoulder in Knox's direction, he practically throws himself off the train, letting out an exalted whoop as he lands.

After Charlie, Pitts is the one who wordlessly makes his way out, having to crouch down further than either Neil or Charlie due to his tall, lanky stature, before he too makes it onto the platform safely.

And now that there are only four members of the friend group remaining on the train- and judging from the three expecting looks he is now on the receiving end of- Knox comes to the realization he is going to have to be the sorry bastard to take one for the team and go

next.

Heart in his throat, Knox sways awkwardly as he makes his way fully out of the subway car, making him stand at a crossroads between the car he just came from and staring at the potential safety of another.

He tries his hardest to push his anxiety down to the pit of his stomach as he climbs up onto the divider, squeezing onto the handholds for dear life as he sways, attempting to grasp a center of gravity he has been trying to obtain for the last twenty years.

Okay, this is no big deal , Knox tells himself in an all-ditch effort to decrease his heart rate. *You're just about to jump off of a moving subway train . You've done this plenty of times .*

The little pep-talk Knox tries to give himself does nothing to calm him down. Instead, it only causes him to panic *even fucking more.* It only further illuminates the fact he is about to try jumping off a subway train going fifty-miles an hour, and that one wrong move can either end with him permanently hospitalized with life-sustaining injuries or dragged to death by the subway, sentencing him to an eternity of haunting this little corner of almost forgotten New York City history.

Breathing slowly, Knox counts to three in his head before finally taking the leap, because he knows. He knows if he stands up here any longer, he is going to lose his nerve.

And then-

Weightlessness.

That is the first thing that overtakes Knox as he soars off the train.

The weightlessness is short-lived, as he is not even airborne for a full five seconds before he is crash-landing on the ground, letting out a sharp hiss of pain with the way his ankle twists weirdly upon making contact with the concrete ground.

S prained . A little voice in his head supplies.

Yeah, no fucking shit , a second, way more sarcastic voice replies that sounds eerily similar to Charlie.

The tension of his body weight pressing down onto his ankle makes Knox flail in his struggle to regain his footing. He can't, which sends him stumbling backwards closer and closer to the subway track, until

the pain becomes too much to bear and Knox completely crumbles back. Yet before his clumsiness gets him thrown onto the track, someone manages to rush to where he is and pull him forward by grabbing a fistful of his shirt, effectively saving him from imminent death.

Knox lets out a surprised curse as the bodyweight of whoever saved him lands on top of him, their fall being cushioned by Knox's backpack.

"Baby, *please* be a little more careful next time, yeah?"

Scratch that. Maybe getting dragged to death by the subway wouldn't have been so bad, after all.

Ears burning, Knox opens his eyes to see Charlie smirking down at him, his hazel eyes scintillating in the City Hall lights in a way that almost makes them appear green.

In retrospect, Knox knows he should be thankful for his savior. However, with the way Charlie is smirking down at him, it is taking every ounce of Knox's being not to shove Charlie off of him.

"You're hilarious, Dalton," Knox deadpans. "A real gem of comedy."

Charlie wiggles his eyebrows.

"Well, they do call me the next Adam Sandler for a reason, you know."

"No, they don't. And if they did, I wouldn't take it as a compliment."

A surprised laugh bubbles out of Charlie, and it's then Knox realizes how close the two of them are with Charlie laying on top of him. His laughter fans Knox's face in a way that he can smell the lemon-flavored Zyn pouch Charlie must've popped in at some point while they were on the train, and being this close- with roughly four inches between them- Know can make out little gold flecks in Charlie's eyes he hasn't ever noticed before.

Distantly, Knox registers Charlie's laughter dying down, leaving the two of them to stare at each other, unblinking.

Knox tries his hardest to find something- *anything* - to say, but his mind frustratingly comes up blank. He wets his lips nervously with his tongue, and then Charlie is quickly rolling off of Knox and lifting

himself off the floor without so much as saying a word.

He goes on to hold out an expectant hand towards Knox, which he stares at for a few moments before allowing Charlie to pull him up.

Knox sways a little, wincing at the pain, and Charlie reaches out to stabilize Knox with gentle hands on his waist and a laugh that rings out as forced. I t immediately makes Knox feel uneasy; he can go the whole rest of his college years without hearing Charlie sound like that.

“Careful there, I don’t want you falling for me or-”

“Knox! I saw you land funny, are you alright?”

The oncoming voice makes Knox turn to see that Neil is quickly making his way towards them, accompanied by the others. For some reason, the thought of having everyone see Knox with Charlie after. . . whatever that was, makes him even *more* uneasy than Charlie trying to laugh it off. Unabashed horror twists in Knox’s stomach at the sight of his friends, as he quickly steps away from Charlie, the action causing Charlie’s hands to drop.

Knox opens his mouth to reply, but Charlie beats him to it.

“Are you sure your dad wasn’t onto something when he said you should’ve gone to medical school, Perry?”

While Neil scoffs at the remark and the others chuckle, Knox just frowns; deflection is Charlie’s go-to when confronting emotions and situations that made him uncomfortable. Is that seriously what he is doing right now? Was being that close to Knox something he finds disconcerting?

“I sprained my ankle,” Knox explains as Neil crouches down at the ankle in question. “I think.”

Pitts snorts, shaking his head.

“Fumblestreet strikes again.”

Knox is ready to spit back that *no, Fumblestreet most certainly did not strike again,* when he takes a quick look around at their little group. Other than him, everyone else seems alright in the aftermath of jumping off the train.

And it is then, as he does his second look around, that he realizes they

are a man down. He's only on the receiving end of six concerned looks, the only one absent being-

"Uh, hello! Guys, what do I do?"

With the way Cameron is yelling, Knox honest to God thinks he succumbed to death by subway. It's at that moment everyone else has caught up with him and realizes Cameron is missing in action.

So, when everyone snaps their heads in the direction of his yelling, only to see that Cameron is still on the subway dividers, white-knuckling the steel as his window for being able to jump onto the platform drastically dwindles, all they can do is stare in astonishment as the subway screeches around the corner, the last glimpse of Cameron they are able to catch being his bright red-hair before the subway completely disappears from view.

Not death by subway, then. Death by humiliation from not making it off the divider in time and having to go around the loop again by himself.

All six of them blink at where the subway once was, unmoving.

Naturally, Charlie is the one who breaks the silence.

"Holy fucking shit."

Knox wants to say it takes an hour for the subway train Cameron is on to make its way back around the loop again, and when he finally jumps off the train and joins them onto the platform, he responds to his jovially cheering welcome committee with a poignant middle finger.

With Cameron now on the platform with them, they slowly make their way around the station, taking in the arching ceilings, stone architecture, and dark green glass tiles, occasionally hiding behind pillars so the subways that pass through the station don't catch sight of them.

They end up spending a half hour lurking around the station before coming to the decision to start making their way back to the Brooklyn Station by walking along the tracks of the subway. Knox finds himself sandwiched between Todd and Pitts as he limps along the track, the two of them allowing him to throw his arms around their shoulders to relieve resting tension on his ankle. He feels guilty, being the sole

reason everyone has to slow down, but he knows if he says too much about it his friends are going to heckle him mercilessly with reassurance.

So while everyone around him is talking about the night's events, Knox stares down at his feet, avoiding everyone's gaze, even when Charlie tries to get a rile out of him by teasingly calling him a klutz.

Hearing Charlie's teasing naturally causes Knox's mind to drift back to earlier in the evening, with what happened with Charlie after they jumped off the train.

Yeah, Charlie had wound up saving him from an ultimate death, but there is no way he could have mistaken the sudden tension permeating the air between them after Charlie had toppled on top of him during his rescue attempt. Why did they just linger there, staring at each other like that? When thinking back on his last few years of friendship, Knox cannot immediately recall any situations where he has felt this way.

After a few minutes mulling it over, he decides to come to the conclusion they only had that reaction because neither of them knew what to do given the fact Knox almost died.

Yeah. That seems plausible enough.

They all continue making their way down the track for about ten minutes when they finally catch sight of the Brooklyn station. The fact all of them were able to sneak into a monitored abandoned train station without being caught by metro police is nothing short of a miracle, and when Knox finally climbs up onto the platform and off of the train tracks with an extended hand from Charlie, he lets out a relieved breath. He tries his hardest not to look at the drunk middle-aged man that is sitting on the bench, watching them climb off of the subway tracks with such a look of horror that he clearly isn't sure if Knox and his friends are real or just a drunk imagination.

"Well ," Meeks says, clapping his hands. "That was fucking terrifying."

"But we survived," Neil grins with a teasing punch at Meeks' shoulder, which causes the former to roll his eyes.

"But we survived." Meeks agrees, his voice taking on a wistful quality to it about the night coming to a close.

"We- we need to do something again really soon," Todd says softly,

bringing his arms around himself.

Various choruses of agreement break out from the group as everyone heads out of the station. One by one, each of Knox's friends heads off in a different direction, leaving just him and Charlie outside of the train station that will lead them back to White Plains.

Charlie turns towards Knox, raising an eyebrow up at him.

"Shall we?" he asks.

Smiling, Knox rolls his eyes and cannot do anything but trail behind him.

On the ride home, Knox drums his fingers absentmindedly against his thighs to the beat of The Hollies. Charlie, true to his words, handed over the reins for Knox and has allowed him to take on the role of DJ.

From where he is right next to him, Charlie is passed out asleep, his head tipped back on Knox's shoulder at such an unnatural angle it is a miracle Charlie hasn't broken his neck due to the sharp jerking of the train.

As much as the small part of Knox wants to gently roll Charlie's head against the window due to the uncomfortable kink beginning to form in his shoulder blade, Knox refrains against it. He instead frowns down at Charlie, his brows furrowing as he takes in the way Charlie mouth is slightly agape.

It's so weird seeing Charlie Dalton- a man who usually went above and beyond in his attempts at garnering the attention of others- so subdued and relaxed around Knox. But alas, Charlie Dalton is more human than he likes to portray himself to be, and even he falls weak to the human desires of sleep, even if it is at the expense of Knox's music taste.

Despite how much shit Knox is going to give Charlie when they pull back into the train station close to their apartment complex, Knox always loved nights like these throughout his time with the Poets; the late ones where they would spend the evening seeing parts of New York long forgotten by history, wreaking havoc in the streets and not giving a damn who is watching.
It really showed just how much Knox hit the friend group jackpot, Cameron's incessant complaining and Neil and Todd's tooth-rotting PDA be damned.

Knox's little frown transforms into a smile when looking back on the evening, and it's then he notices the stray piece of Charlie's bangs that must have gently fallen out of place during the ride back.

It also is then he suddenly remembers what Charlie said back at the subway, after the weird moment they shared:

Careful there, I don't want you falling for me or -

Or what?

T he words now, Knox realizes, are an echo of what Charlie had said the first time they met on move day back in Freshman year, after Knox almost concussed him with a box of towels he was trying to haul towards his dorm and ended up accidentally tumbling down the stairs. Charlie usually is known for making flirty quips, they are practically part of his daily vernacular with everybody, but something about it makes Knox stop short.

A strong influx overtakes Knox to reach out and to tuck the small piece of hair off of Charlie's forehead. Biting down on his lip, Knox tears his eyes away from Charlie and slowly pulls out his beaten up copy of *The Reagan Diaries* from his backpack *,* confused where the impulse came from in the first place.

Five pages into his Imperialism final, Knox hears a text notification cut through the thick silence that has long since fallen over the kitchen.

Eyes narrowing, he looks up from his Macbook to where his phone is resting on the kitchen counter. He knows it isn't Charlie; despite being a quick walk down the hall, Charlie sometimes gets lazy and likes to spam Knox's phone with texts throughout the evening. Yet surprisingly, he agreed to keep the spam texting to a minimum for the next few hours so Knox can get his essay done.

Which leaves six other possible culprits.

And at this point, if he cannot make this final sound comprehensible, he is going to include in the acknowledgements of his paper all of his friends names *and* phone numbers so his professor knows who to hold responsible.

Knox heaves himself off the chair to make his way across the kitchen for his phone. He could have *sworn* he muted The Dead Poets Discord server before he got to work on his essay, but the caffeine could also

be fucking with his brain at this point, too, so he isn't entirely certain of his sense of direction anymore.

When Knox turns on his phone, his eyes widen with the knowledge that it is most definitely *not* one of the guys and Knox had in fact muted his Discord notifications.

A loud yelp escapes past Knox's lips when processing exactly *who* has reached out and his phone slides out of his hands, clambering to the tiled floor below. His phone crashes hard enough that it could possibly have broken, but Knox is too caught up with how quick his heart-rate began racing underneath his skin to turn his phone over and take a look.

Heart beating eratically, Knox stares down as the name *Chris Noel* reads across the screen There is still a little yellow heart by her contact name, one Knox didn't have in him to remove in the aftermath of their breakup. It only makes the text notification from her all the more taunting, in some sort of fucked up way, though Knox knows that isn't her intent. He stares down

"Hey, what the fuck is going on out there?" Charlie voice calls from down the hall. It's now that Knox is taken out of his academic headspace he realizes Charlie is blaring some Deftones album off of the CD player Pitts stole on one of his and Meeks's dumpster diving extravaganzas, the song being muffled by Charlie's bedroom door being closed.

Knox's lips open, yet no words come out; at this point, his mouth is too dry to articulate anything.

"Knox?"

Charlie's voice sounds closer, yet Knox doesn't move. Distantly, he can hear Charlie turning off his CD player, cutting off Chino Moreno's vocals.

"Knoxious, you're worrying me, here. What's going on?"

The sound of footsteps making their way down the hall finally gets Knox to snap out of his stupor, and he turns his head to see Charlie walking into the living room. His brunet hair looks messier than normal, a byproduct of running his hands through it, and the flannel pajama pants he is wearing hang low on his hips.

He's not wearing a shirt , Knox thinks dumbly, and he has to avert his

eyes away from Charlie as he leans against the doorframe not to stare at the way his abs are peaking out of the waistline of his pajamas.

"I'm fine," Knox says stiffly, clearing his throat.

Charlie raises an unimpressed brow in return.

"Yeah, you're really the picture perfect definition of calm and collected, you are."

Knox lets out a long sigh, ignoring the sarcastic barb from Charlie, in favor of retrieving his phone off the ground.

It's not cracked, thank *fucking God* , because if he broke another phone or body part, his parents were going to turn him into The Bubble Boy.

Knox quickly reads the message in its entirety now that he is getting over his initial shock, unsure entirely what to make of it.

2:53am

Chris Noel <3

Hey, Knox! It was great running into you and Charlie the other day. I'm so sorry for the late message, but I'm so glad to know you're doing well and found someone. I'm hosting a party at my house next Saturday since my parents are out of town to kick off the semester. It starts at 8. Let me know if you guys are able to swing by!

Knox doesn't know how to blame him, but he still decides to anyway; this whole situation has Chet Danbury's dirty fingerprints written all over it.

He sends an almost bemused smile in Charlie's direction in spite of himself.

"Well, *honey* ," he says, nervously toying with the phone in his hand. "If you really want to know, Chris just invited us to a party she's hosting at her parents' place next Saturday."

Charlie blinks at him, astonished.

“Really?” he asks incredulously. Knox turns his phone over so Charlie can read the text message lighting up his screen, watching the way Charlie’s forehead scrunches as he stares down at the phone screen. “Are you- *really?* !”

Knox has to fight the noise of dejection he wants to let out.

“What do you mean, ‘ *really?’* ”

“Chris wasn’t just using some line? She *actually* wants us to hang out with her and that football-eating douche Chet Danbury?”

“I don’t- I think so?”

When noticing the confused look on his face, Charlie continues, taking pity on him. “At the store. ‘Oh, let’s all hang out sometime’ being uttered by an ex is usually codespeak for ‘this is awkward, lets never see each other again.’”

This time Knox doesn’t hold back the groan he lets out, clutching his face with his hands.

God, he wishes that would be the case. Anybody in the world would *think* that would be the case. But Chris is in a foot race with Todd for being the nicest people on the damn planet. Like Knox, she is honest to a fault; it was one of the things that made him fall in love with her when they first met. She wouldn’t just say some empty-worded idea. She always follows through.

“Besides that, what’s up with the heart by her name still?”

The pivot in Charlie’s line of questioning makes Knox flush, especially with the way Charlie’s face slips into a more unreadable expression as he adds, “You’re not still hung up on her, are you?”

“I-” Knox flounders weakly. He lets out another sigh. “I am over her, and I respect her decision to break up with me. It’s just- she was my first real relationship and I didn’t have the heart to remove it when we broke up and I completely forgot about it at this point until the message came up. It’s pathetic, I know.”

Knox lets out a self-deprecating laugh, which makes Charlie frown a little, but after a few seconds he nods his head and his expression regains something a lot more familiar.

“So, do you want to go?”

The conversation being circled around to the party again makes Knox let out another weak groan in response. He mumbles incoherently into the palm of his hands, his fingers serving as the citadel protecting his impending insecurity from Charlie's unblinking scrutiny.

"Do you want to go?" Charlie prompts, on the brink of being impatient, as he stares at Knox.

Knox drops his hands.

"I said 'we're going.' I'm not giving Chet Danbury any sort of satisfaction."

Charlie sends him an incredulous look at that.

"You seriously think Chet made Chris invite us? You do realize that's a little far fetched, right? Dude looked about ready to football tackle you into the aisle."

"Not if I would have tackled him first," Knox grumbles petulantly under his breath, purposely avoiding looking over at Charlie as he shakily begins typing out a message

2:59am

Knox Overstreet

Hey, Chris! It is not a problem, I understand how things come up. But Charlie and I would love to come.

Not even a few minutes after sending the last message, another one lights up on his phone from Chris.

3:07am

Chris Noel <3

Awesome! I'll see you guys then :)

A smiley face.

Chris texted him back with a fucking *smiley face* , once again proving the point that she is nice to everyone no matter what.

Hastily, Knox opens up his contact profile for Chris, and quickly makes work of removing the heart by her name, feeling warm under Charlie's watchful gaze. It only did make sense for him to delete it now that he was called out for it, *especially* by his best friend who is going to be masquerading as his boyfriend next Saturday.

Knox turns off his phone in his newfound state of dejection, ready to be done with the conversation and just go to *bed* , his Imperialism essay be damned. But then an idea comes to him that makes him open the messenger app back up again. He mulls it over for a few seconds before typing it out and sending it. He knows he's going to regret it come tomorrow, but right now he doesn't have it in himself to care.

3:12am

Knox

Perfect! Would it be alright if I brought the rest of the guys along?

Standing at the Station, in Need of Education

Chapter Summary

Knox's eyes quickly scan over the faces and names of his students for the upcoming semester, until he comes across one in particular that makes his heart stop.

If he is going through the roster and only going off names, he would pass off Charlie Dalton as a common enough name. But photo rosters are incriminating, and as Knox is staring down at the blurry black and white photos, he realizes the Charlie Dalton in his History of Popular Culture class this semester is his Charlie Dalton.

Even based on his Columbia University ID, Knox can tell Charlie is trouble, from how his hazel eyes are sparkling and the small smirk curling around the corners of his lips. It's almost as if Charlie through the photo is saying "Surprise, fucker!" to Knox about popping up in the class he is TA-ing for.

Chapter Notes

So after roughly four years, I am finally posting a new chapter for this fic! Who would have thought, huh?

Thank you to everyone so much for your patience during these re-writes; hearing all of your feedback is such a large motivator and means the absolute world.

A few things to note about this chapter; this is going to serve as the new chapter four, while the original chapter four- Good Vibrations- is going to get pushed back to chapter five (which will remain relatively the same, but with a few new scene additions and rewrites). I added this chapter to establish a glimpse into university life for Knox and the rest of the poets by extension, and also to fit in the new plot point of Charlie signing up for Knox's class he TAs for.

This chapter also include an OC in Dr. Callahan, who is serving as the history professor in this fic. In the canon movie, there is no references to who the name of their history teacher at Welton is. Hence: the creation of this OC. During this rewriting process I briefly considered making the history professor Knox TA's for

Keating, but Keating is already featured in the original publications as Charlie's main influence for wanting to be an English teacher, and I did not want to take that away from Charlie's background in this fic.

As always, thank you to @auxctor for listening to my random rants and providing me advice for characterization, and my friend @achillesunly on Tumblr for beta-ing this chapter for me. I still feel a little iffy on it, but the sooner I get this chapter up and the re-writes complete, the closer I will be to finally getting this thing completed for y'all :)

Again, thank you all so so much, and I hope you all enjoy <3

Ali

The last few days of summer go by way too quickly for Knox's enjoyment , and before he knows it he is standing in his kitchen Monday morning on the first day of the semester, making enough breakfast sandwiches to feed an entire battalion.

Now that he has his own place and isn't in one of the underclassmen dorms, he's able to cook more and doesn't have to eat out as much, something his body and bank account is thankful for.

To Knox's surprise, as he is finishing up with the last breakfast sandwich, Charlie comes padding into the kitchen. Even more surprising is that he is already dressed in a dark flannel and ripped jeans, his backpack slung over one shoulder and his skateboard tucked underneath his other arm. It's an unusual sight, especially before noon when it is notorious Charlie always makes sure to sign up for classes in the evenings whenever he doesn't have soccer practice.

Unmoving, Knox and Charlie stare at each other for a long moment.

" Y ou're up early. " Knox greets, trying his hardest to sound casual.

All Charlie does is bark out a laugh as he collapses onto one of their kitchen tables, watching with his chin in palm while Knox makes work of flipping the last sunnyside-up egg onto an English Muffin.

"A fter some heavy convincing on Cameron 's end, I decided to join the land of the living and take a morning class ."

Trying to hide his nerves at being under surveillance by his new audience, Knox slaps down the slice of American cheese a little too

harshly onto the sandwich he is finishing as he says, “ I’ll believe it when I see it. ”

Charlie opens his mouth, most likely ready to make some sarcastic barb , but he immediately closes his mouth when Knox takes a couple of the wrapped breakfast sandwiches and throws them in Charlie’s general direction.

Charlie manages to catch them with ease, the asshole, and he holds one of the breakfast sandwiches over his heart.

“ I ’m in love with you. ” he declares loudly, quickly ducking to the side to dodge the swat to the shoulder Knox is about to give him with the spatula.

“Y eah, I bet you are, ” Knox laughs, and snags one of the breakfast sandwiches he made for himself. “ What kind of asshole would I be if I made breakfast in front of you and didn't make you anything, anyways? I’m with the government, and I’m here to help. ”

Charlie lets out a loud groan.

“F uck, you’re a nerd, ” he groans, but there is still a smile on his face. “ Reagan, Knoxious? Really ?”

Knox points the breakfast sandwich he’s eating in Charlie’s direction, grinning.

“ I ’m reading his diaries right now , you cannot hold me responsible .”

With a roll of his eyes, Charlie unwraps the parchment paper and takes a giant bite of his sandwich.

“W hy the hell you would read anything that rat bastard wrote is beyond me, ” he grumbles around a mouthful of food. “ You can trace that menace to the downfall of current politics .”

And the crazy thing is, that is *exactly* why Knox reads historical non-fiction all the time; if he is going to pursue a degree in history and teach students about Reaganomics and the impact it’s had on modern-day ideologies, he has to gain some sort of understanding from the source itself, no matter how disillusioned it is.

Out loud, Knox simply says, “ You have to get the history from the rat bastard itself, ” which only causes Charlie to shake his head. He

mumbles something under his breath at Knox, which eerily sounds like “ dork ” and comes to a stand, stretching out his arms exaggeratedly.

“W ell, as much as I’d like to sit and shoot shit, classes beckon. ”

After picking up his skateboard and hauling his backpack up on his shoulder, Charlie must notice the expression of disbelief on Knox’s face because he frowns.

“W hat? " he demands, eyes narrowing slightly. " Why are you looking at me like that ?”

“I- you’re actually taking a morning class?”

He doesn’t mean to sound too much like an asshole, and Knox feels guilty at the appalled look on Charlie’s face in response to the question.

“M an of wee faith, Overstreet. You wound me .”

And it’s then, as he mimes a fainting gesture, that Knox realizes something.

“W ait, what class did you sign up for? I thought all your classes were in the evening ?”

Charlie doesn’t directly answer, only hollering a languid, “ I’ll see you soon, Lehrer Overstreet! ” over his shoulder before letting the door close behind him.

Knox stares after him, frowning in confusion, before shaking his head and hastily shoving his dirty dishes in the sink, already concluding dirty dishes are going to be *future Charlie’s* problem .

About a half hour after Charlie leaves, Knox finds himself heading out the door , doing a quick check through his leather messenger bag to make sure he has everything before doing so .

There are minimal delays with the subway this morning- thank *fucking God*- so he can swing by one of his favorite coffee spots, 787 Coffee, to grab Dr. Callahan and himself coffees to get them through the first class of the semester. Because come week four when they start getting slammed with essays, they are going to need it.

As Knox rushes around the corner of La Salle and Broadway, Barnard

College looms overhead, looking just as intimidating as it had back when Knox was eighteen. With a brick wall and iron gate surrounding the perimeter that lead to beautiful gardens stretched across the walkway to the main building, Barnard is the private all-women's liberal arts school under the Columbia University umbrella. Yet, despite Barnard being an all-women's university, the History Department at Columbia often holds classes within the halls of the college, due to the unique intersectionality both departments share.

Knox breezes past a few of the slower-moving students up the stairs and barely manages to catch the door the person in front of him swings open. He makes sure to stay back to hold the door for a group of freshman-looking girls coming up behind him, who all blush and giggle their thanks as they pass. Knox shoots them an awkward smile in return.

As soon as the last girl is through the door, Knox kicks the door open for whoever is behind him and heads deeper into the lobby, precariously balancing the two lattes in his hand as he books it towards the elevator.

After slamming the elevator " up " button more frenetically than he should, he finally starts to let out a sigh of relief when the elevator door stutters open-

Only to have it completely escape him in a confused rush.

Because leaning up against the wall in the right corner of the elevator, either completely oblivious to the elevator door dinging open or just not giving a shit about who sees them, is a lesbian couple aggressively sucking face.

A part of Knox wants to slink back because this is just about par for the course for Knox's luck to accidentally barge in on a couple during an intimate moment together. But like *hell* is he going to be late for his meeting with Dr. Callahan before their class because of a couple of lesbians making out. So, while the confused-looking dude behind him spins on his heels and makes a run for the stairs, Knox marches into the depths of the elevator, trying his hardest to keep his attention forward in a show of respect for the makeout spot he is encroaching on.

Knox mindlessly clicks the third-floor button as the door closes and swallows thickly, his fingers hovering in the air with indecision.

"S o, uh, " Knox breaks conversationally, the words slipping past his

lips against his own volition. “ What floor are you guys going to ?”

Silence immediately takes hold of the elevator.

The back of Knox’s neck pricks awkwardly under the scrutiny of the two looks he is now on the receiving end of, but Knox cannot force himself to look over, even if he tried, too frozen in mortification.

Murder him. Someone fucking *murder him* . He should never be left outside of his apartment unattended *ever again* .

Agonizingly slow, the elevator creeps up until it finally chimes at Knox’s stop on the third floor Knox bursts through the doors not even a second after they open, and- because Knox apparently doesn’t know how to *shut the fuck up* - hollers a, “ have a nice day! ” over his shoulder as he hurries towards Dr. Callahan’s office at the end of the hall.

His face must still be red when he knocks on the door, because when Dr. Callahan creaks the door to his office open, his eyebrows shoot up.

“D id you run on your way here? ” he asks, clearly looking like he was trying not to laugh. “ You could have sent an email if you were running late , I would have understood. Especially when coffee’s involved. ”

Knox lets out an embarrassed groan as he hands Dr. Callahan his Mazapan Latte.

“I f I told you what I just witnessed, you wouldn’t believe me, even if I tried. ”

Dr. Callahan takes the latte out of Knox’s hands, tipping the to-go cup in appreciation.

“T he nectar of the Gods, ” he muses, before taking a long sip. “ Thank you. ”

Knox laughs as he sits in one of the vacant seats in Dr. Callahan’s office, looking around at the familiar skyscrapers of literature on the shelves.

It’s honestly crazy to think four semesters have passed since Dr. Callahan personally pulled him aside and asked him if he would be interested in applying for the recently vacant TA position he had opened up, especially because Knox wasn’t even supposed to be in Dr.

Callahan's upper-level Renaissance seminar, to begin with.

But thank God his freshman academic advisor took one look at his AP-credit load and shoe-horned him into the class , anyway. The one decision ultimately sent him on the path of finding a degree he actually is passionate about , instead of just continuing with pre-law courses to follow in his father's footsteps as the eldest son.

Taking a sip of his Horchata Latte, Knox rests his Macbook on his thighs as he loads up his digital copy of the syllabi. While in previous semesters Knox memorized the syllabi by heart, what he did tell Chris about Dr. Callahan changing the course curriculum isn't a lie, so Knox is thrilled for the change of pace the semester is going to bring.

The two of them go back and forth, bouncing off each other last minute adjustments to the schedule as needed and before he knows it they are gathering up their belongings and getting ready to head out to their class. Dr. Callahan takes some of the stray papers on his desk, separating the top packet of paper and holding it out for Knox to take.

"H ere is a copy of the photo roster of our students for the semester. You know the drill by now ."

"Make an attendance tracker for the students and email you a copy?" Knox assumes with a grin, taking the photo roster in an instant.

His eyes quickly scan over the faces and names of his students for the upcoming semester, until he comes across one in particular that makes his heart stop.

If he is going through the roster and only going off names, he would pass off Charlie Dalton as a common enough name. But photo rosters are incriminating, and as Knox is staring down at the blurry black and white photos, he realizes the Charlie Dalton in his History of Popular Culture class this semester is *his* Charlie Dalton.

Even based on his Columbia University ID, Knox can tell Charlie is trouble, from how his hazel eyes are sparkling and the small smirk curling around the corners of his lips. It's almost as if Charlie through the photo is saying "Surprise, fucker!" to Knox about popping up in the class he is TA-ing for.

As much as Knox wants to be hurt for Charlie signing up for his class without saying anything, not even a, *"Hey, by the way, I signed up for the class you have been TA-ing for the last four semesters!"* Knox is more confused than anything.

Out of all his friends, Charlie is probably the one who teased Knox the most about being a TA; his teasing didn't come from a place of malice, more so that Charlie loved teasing Knox for being so passionate about it. How Knox would be mercilessly honest in giving his students feedback but wouldn't go overboard into being too much of a dick, or how he has on multiple occasions ditched his friend's study groups in the library with a sheepish wave to go sit with one of his students who was struggling through an essay.

So knowing Charlie, for knowing how much he loved teasing Knox about how strict he would get with his job, why the *fuck* would Charlie agree to take the class Knox is co-teaching? And why the hell wouldn't he *say anything about it?*

Suddenly, the quick conversation Charlie had with Knox before leaving this morning replays in his head.

I'll see you soon, Lehrer Overstreet.

If Knox is being entirely honest, he thought Charlie was just being weird for the sake of being weird . But the quip, combined with the fact Charlie was up early enough to make sure he would head into the city for Knox's 9 am, is starting to make things fall into place. He *did* tell Knox , just in his usual, roundabout way so he wouldn't have to face any confrontation about it.

"C harlie Dalton, " are the only words capable of coming out of Knox's mouth, and he looks up at Dr. Callahan. " Does it say when he enrolled in the course ?"

Dr. Callahan frowns at Knox, but still humors him by quickly opening up his laptop and beginning typing something up.

"According to my records, it shows he enrolled last night. Do you know him? Is it going to cause any issues?"

"O h no, of course not, it's just- " Knox lets out a nervous peal of laughter. " He's my roommate and has been one of my best friends for years. He didn't tell me he was planning on enrolling in the course ."

Dr. Callahan nods his head in understanding, and it's then that Knox thinks on it further.

" *I s* it going to cause an issue? " he suddenly asks. " That he's my best friend? Is there some kind of conflict of interest with that ?"

Dr. Callahan purses his lips in thought before an amused expression takes over.

“ U sually it would be encouraged to have either your friend or yourself transfer to a different section, but you’ve always been fair, Knox. I trust that you will not give him any sort of favoritism .”

Knox rolls his eyes as he hoists his bag strap on his shoulder.

“L ike hell, I won’t , ” he cannot help but scoff.

After a final check around the room, they head out of Dr. Callahan’s office and down the flight of stairs- as a result of Knox’s almost desperate persistence- toward Lehman Auditorium Lecture Hall, where their class is going to be held. Because he has had *enough* with the damn elevator today.

By the time they walk in, Knox notices most of the seats are occupied , so everyone who is supposed to be here for this class has already arrived or is on their way. Or some of the students who *thought* they were showing up for a different class were already here. It doesn’t happen often, but it happens way more than people think it does .

Knox would know; he’s one of the sorry bastards who's *done it.*

The lecture hall quiets down considerably at their arrival, and despite himself, Knox scans over the dozens of students to try and catch sight of Charlie , only to come up short. Sighing, he finds a vacant seat in the first row and sets up shop, pulling out his Macbook and the class roster while Dr. Callahan makes work of loading up his lecture slides on the PowerPoint from the lectern at the front of the classroom.

It’s the first day of the semester, which means Syllabus day, so Knox knows the lecture is mainly going to be centered around introducing everyone to the content and course expectations.

“W ith a class of so many of you, there is no way I would be able to effectively run this course without any assistance , ” Dr. Callahan says after making his way through his introduction. “ Which is why I am very fortunate to have a TA who not only will be helping all of you with course-related assistance, but also with my grading and some of the behind-the-scenes assistance needed. Knox ?”

Knox swallows thickly as he comes to a stand, making his way towards the front of the lecture hall. Usually, on syllabus day he is used to giving an introduction and would be filled with more excited

nerves than anxious ones about speaking in a crowded lecture hall. Knowing Charlie is somewhere in the audience, watching Knox silently, makes him nervous, because his professional world and personal one are combined into one, and he really isn't sure how he feels about it.

Knox clears his throat.

"Hey everyone!" he greets, projecting his voice so he can be heard throughout the lecture hall. He flashes a wide smile towards the sea of students that he hopes masks his nerves. "My name is Knox Overstreet. I'm an undergraduate studying history here at Columbia and I am going to be your TA for the semester! I just wanted to start by thanking you all for signing up for our class, whether it was by force from your academic advisor or an act of free will. But regardless, you should be lucky, because you do get to take a class with both the best dressed professors on campus."

The joke causes a few students to laugh, and Knox swears he can make out Charlie's telltale snicker somewhere in the audience. Behind the lectern, Dr. Callahan is shaking his head and laughing at him.

From there the class goes by smoothly enough; students seem to be pretty engaged for the first day of class and are laughing at all the appropriate places during the lecture. Knox even manages to whip out the attendance tracker in time to become heavily entertained by a wayward student- who surprisingly isn't Charlie- who somehow managed to derail the class lecture by debating about the presence of ancient aliens.

True to Knox's suspicions, their class ends up letting out early for the day, and it's while Knox is packing away his belongings that he hears him.

"H ey, Knoxious !"

Spinning around, Knox looks up to see Charlie bounding down the lecture hall stairs towards him, wearing a shit-eating smirk. A couple of curious students look over.

"O r should I say, *Professor Overstreet* , " he greets with a wink, stopping a couple of steps above him. " You think I can take you up on coming into your office for ' extra credit ' at some point ?"

Knox feels his cheeks warm at the nickname and the crude joke.

“P lease do me a favor and never call me that ever again .”

All Charlie does is laugh, stuffing his hands in his jeans pockets.

“T hat was some first class, ” he muses. He pauses a moment. “ I honestly was expecting you to be a lot more surprised to see me .”

“I received that shock when getting the photo roster earlier, so unfortunately you didn’t get the pleasure of seeing my reaction in person, ” Knox rolls his eyes. “ You also could have just told me, you know. ”

“I wasn’t sure how you were going to react,” Charlie admits quietly, picking a thread coming off of his jeans pocket. He quickly pivots. “So what are you doing this afternoon? I was thinking we could get lunch or something at that new bodega that opened up around the corner between classes?”

Knox wants to. He really does, but then he remembers something that makes him stop short.

“I have to go to my Dimensions of American Education class with Pitts .”

Charlie’s shoulders deflate a little.

“O h, right, ” he says. “ I had to take that class last semester when I switched over to English ed. What prof do you got ?”

Knox frowns as he tries recollecting his schedule.

“I want to say it’s Dr. George McAllister? ”

Upon hearing the name, Charlie’s eyes narrow.

“O h, ” he says stiffly. “ *That fucking asshole* .”

The smile growing on Knox’s face falters.

“W ait, what do you mean ‘ that fucking asshole ? ””

When Charlie doesn’t immediately answer, instead shiftily averting eye contact , Knox's heart rate falters .

“C harlie, what do you *mean* that fucking asshole? Who the hell am I stuck with ?”

“ H e’s a menace, is what he is, ” Charlie grumbles. “ You remember that prof I wouldn’t stop bitching to you guys about last semester? The overly strict for no reason one ?”

He waves his hand at Knox, gesturing for him to catch on, but Knox has already connected the dots.

“O h, fuck, I’m done for .”

“Just stick to the syllabus and you’ll be fine, yeah?” Charlie says, his voice becoming dangerously serious. He reaches out and grabs at Knox’s shoulder in what he assumes is supposed to be a reassuring touch, but it is anything but. “You stick to it, he won’t come after you.”

There’s a small part of Knox that feels like Charlie is sending him off to his fucking funeral.

“I f you are trying to reassure me right now you are doing a really shitty job , I hope you know that .”

“G olly, Knoxious, you sure say the sweetest things. Have you been hanging out with Cameron lately? ”

Knox laughs, teasingly shoving at Charlie’s shoulder, which does nothing other than cause Charlie to start laughing along with him.

“K nox, are you ready to head out? ”

At the sound of Dr. Callahan’s voice , Knox straightens , and Charlie immediately drops the hand on Knox’s shoulder when Dr. Callahan comes to a stand in front of them.

He glances between the two of them, an almost knowing expression on his face.

“I assume this is your friend you were talking about earlier? ” he prompts.

Knox nods his head.

“Y es. This is Charlie Dalton: he’s my roommate and best friend. Charlie, you’ve heard a lot about Dr. Callahan .”

Charlie reaches out and shakes Dr. Callahan’s hand, and during the entire exchange, Knox still cannot help but think about how bizarre this entire interaction is. That these two people should not exist in the

same room next to each other , but instead in those two separate worlds Knox has managed to create.

“G ood things, I hope? ” Dr. Callahan asks, returning the handshake.

“Nah, we do a lot of shit talking about you. It’s awkward now that I’m here in your class, I might have to go to my academic advisor and ask to be switched out.”

If Charlie was saying this to any other professor, Knox would scurry up the lecture hall stairs and run for the hills to evade the scene. But fortunately for Charlie, Dr. Callahan has always been amicable with students and had a sense of humor that often made its way into conversation.

So, instead of being on the receiving end of a lecture at the joke, Dr. Callahan just grins at Charlie.

“ Y ou’re a hellraiser, aren’t you? ” Dr. Callahan assumes with a laugh, but not unkindly as he shakes Charlie’s hand.

“O nly to the strict professors, ” Charlie says cheekily, and Knox is unable to help the snicker he lets out.

The three of them head up the lecture hall stairs, and a few other students come up to ask Dr. Callahan a question while they make their journey out of the classroom.

Since Knox is already teetering on being late for his next class, he gives a wave over his shoulder and races out the door.

Thankfully, Knox’s education class is also in Barnard a couple floors above the class he TAs for, so he does not have to run all the way across campus to make it to his next class.

By the time Knox hurries through the lecture hall doors, he chances a look at his watch to see he still manages to be a few minutes early, before doing a glance around the room.

It turns out, that finding Pitts in the crowd of students is far easier than trying to catch a glimpse of Charlie earlier; Knox just looks through the crowd for the only guy he sees with a flat top and starts making his way over in that direction.

After their first time meeting Pitts, he can still remember Charlie

loudly declaring outside their dorms, “ What a weird creature he is. I like him .”

A few weeks into the school year first semester, they- Knox, Charlie, Neil, and Cameron- were all heading up to Charlie and Cameron’s dorm to celebrate Neil’s first play in a Juilliard production. The biggest mistake they made that evening was taking the elevator- especially since the elevator in their freshman dorm, Carman Hall, is notorious for breaking down frequently. Joining them in the elevator at the last minute was arguably the goofiest-looking duo Knox had ever seen; a tall lanky dude with a flat top and an orange Hawaiian shirt and his shorter, curly-red-haired counterpart that had glasses thicker than the United States constitution.

All of them partook in the small talk appropriate for a college elevator when suddenly, The Carman Hall elevator struck again and took another casualty. And much to Knox’s chagrin, it had been him, his new college friends, and the two sorry bastards who ended up joining them along for an elevator ride straight from hell.

In the end, it had taken three hours for the NYC Fire Department to get them out of the elevator, and while Steven Meeks and Gerard Pitts walked into that elevator being complete strangers, they walked out becoming the newest members of their ragtag friend group.

Pitts in particular has a big heart and an eclectic fashion sense to match, having an affinity for Hawaiian shirts and 1950s suits. Leaving South Dakota and his strict upbringing was an opportunity Pitts saw to "express himself", which often led to interesting results.

Knox loves the guy to pieces.

When catching sight of Knox, Pitts lightens up. “ Fumblestreet! ” he hollers eagerly.

The cursed nickname be damned, Knox still mirrors the grin on Pitts’s face.

“H ey, Pitts, ” Knox greets breathlessly, practically collapsing into the chair next to him. “ How’s your morning going ?”

“W ould rather be in bed right now, but so it goes, ” Pitts says, despite it being almost eleven. “ How was your first day of teaching ?”

Knox cringes.

“J esus Christ, it’s been something. On the way to my class, I joined some lesbian couple making out in the elevator and then I had a student try to argue with Dr. Callahan that there isn’t evidence that disproves aliens were the ones who built the pyramids because *cameras weren’t invented yet* . Needless to say, I am one more inconvenience away from taking up day drinking as my side hobby .”

“ *F uck,* that’s brutal, ” Pitts snorts as he chances a glance at his phone, beginning to type out a message to someone Knox only assumes is Meeks. “ Do I even want to know why you still decided to hop on an elevator some lesbian couple was making out in ?”

Knox purposely avoids answering Pitts’ question as he takes out his Macbook and Moleskine notebook, along with a couple of pens. He knows that if he even tries to explain his logic, he is going to be on the receiving end of a hard time about it for *weeks* .

Instead, Knox throws out another question in response.

“D id you know Charlie signed up for my History of Popular Culture class this semester ?”

Pitts almost drops his phone as he looks up at Knox in surprise.

“Charlie Dalton, the man who I’ve never seen wake up for a class before noon, enrolled in your entry-level History of Popular Culture course?” he asks flatly.

Knox points his finger a little too aggressively, feeling vindicated.

“That’s exactly what I thought!”

“I mean, it’s bound to have happened at some point, though, ” Pitts then says. “ Friends signing up for their other friends' classes. I highly doubt Charlie’s the first person to have done it .”

Pitts’ surprising indifference makes Knox lean towards him.

“S o you don’t think him signing up for my class without telling me is strange ?”

“N o, I’m still way more intrigued by the lesbian couple you interrupted in the elevator, ” Pitts snickers, to Knox’s chagrin. “ Seriously, what the *fuck* , Knox? You should have left those poor girls alone .”

“I wasn’t going to be late!” Knox hollers indignantly. “They should’ve found a more private place to make out.”

“I have an uncle back in South Dakota who said something eerily similar, once .”

Knox's mouth opens and closes at Pitts incredulously.

“B u- Pitts, *I’m bi.* I would have been just as mortified if I caught some random straight couple making out in the elevator too . ”

Their arguing quickly gets cut off by the echoing sound of a stack of papers slamming against a table.

Knox and Pitts snap their heads towards the front of the room to see a stout man in his mid-forties dropping his briefcase at the front of the lecture hall. He’s smartly dressed in a worn tweed jacket and slacks and looks like the no-nonsense kind of professor Charlie would despise.

Everyone in the class stares at him, motionless, until the professor in front of the room says, with probably the most unimpressed look Knox has ever been on the receiving end of:

“Well don’t just sit there; come on up and grab a syllabus.”

Sharing a look, Knox and Pitts slowly get out of their chairs and make their way to the front of the lecture hall, leading the charge of roughly forty other students who are nervously trailing after them.

It’s syllabus day , Knox tries to reassure himself when he slouches back into his seat and examines the syllabus in his hands. *Nothing too horrible can happen, right?*

But oh, how wrong Knox ends up being.

The first thing Knox noticed that makes it feel like he is being set up for failure is the syllabus.

Ivy Leagues are known for their high levels of competitiveness and academic rigor, so it’s not like Knox hasn’t seen his fair share of difficult syllabi in previous semesters.

Until this class. Because holy fuck, this man is out for blood.

For starters, the syllabus proclaimed that there is no such thing as an ‘ excused ’ absence; it doesn’t matter if it’s sickness or an emergency .

One absence and your grade plummets.

And any hopes of trying to make up any missing assignments or earn extra credit can get thrown out the window , too; as according to Dr McAllister, those also don't exist.

" Y ou're seeing this shit too, right? " Pitts asks, pointing at the syllabus with wide eyes.

"S o much for signing up for a filler class, " Knox says miserably, his forehead creasing as he squints down at his death warrant for the semester. " This man is an honest-to-God sadist ."

"- It doesn't sound like some of you are paying attention, " Dr. McAllister suddenly says, his eyes narrowing considerably in the direction Knox and Pitts are sitting in. " I should not be surprised, yet I still find myself being disappointed ."

They immediately bow their heads and fix their eyes back on the syllabus.

Any hopes Pitts- and Knox, quite frankly at this point- had coming into the class about having an early day quickly get obliterated when Dr. McAllister immediately dives headfirst into lecture content, breaking down the il basic difference between the core pedagogical models in education.

Knox eagerly writes down his notes while Dr. McAllister talks, trying his hardest to translate everything the professor is saying onto the page.

"I t is important as future educators for you to stick to the standards of whichever state and school district you are hired in to ensure we get the best out of your future students, " Dr. McAllister goes on . " It may not be the approach everyone here desperately hopes for, but standards reign over enjoyment when assigning coursework and structuring our classrooms; we are here to educate and promote critical thinking in our students, not fun. Questions? "

Knox immediately finds himself raising his hand.

Dr. McAllister gestures towards Knox, which he takes as his cue.

"W ith all due respect, Dr. McAllister, while I think it's important for us as educators to pass down skill sets to the next generation, I do disagree and think you can combine that with a lively curriculum ."

There’s a little purse of Dr. McAllister's lips that steadily began forming downward the longer Knox talked , as if he is aghast someone is challenging his viewpoint.

“A nd you are…? ” Dr. McAllister trails off, advancing toward where Knox is sitting.

“Knox Overstreet, sir,” Knox supplies quickly, leaning forward. “You see, I have been doing TA work in the history department at Columbia since my freshman year, and the professors whose classes I’ve taken found a balance between a critical thinking, Socratic approach and interweaving it with different methodologies that encourage student-led initiatives. It’s fascinating and proves how making students empowered in the classroom can help them have more of an appreciation for the standards they’re being taught.”

Dr. McAllister clicks his tongue. “ Now, Mr. Overstreet, have you taken any of the education courses here at Columbia University at this point in your degree ?”

The firmness his voice takes on makes Knox falter.

“W ell, no, sir- ” he admits with a cringe.

“A nd if you had taken any education classes, you would be aware that if you are going to be approved by me and the other board of professors in the education department to continue in your degree to do your student teaching you need to show a strict uphold of Columbia’s teaching standards that you have just blatantly disregarded in front of the rest of the class.

Knox’s jaw almost drops.

“I wasn’t-“

“Y our arrogance is disconcerting. While being a TA may look good on paper, if you are unable to stick to the education standards laid out by this university, I highly suggest you consider another profession, Mr. Overstreet. ”

All Knox can do is stare wordlessly, his face flushing hot with shame as he watches Dr. McAllister stroll down the steps, his hands behind his back as he continues to drone on.

He feels his eyes start stinging , and has to fiercely blink to fight the tears threatening to spill over , ducking his head down so it looks like

he is avidly taking notes.

What the fuck?

Never- at least that Knox can remember- has he ever had a professor completely disregard a student trying to participate in a class like this ; it is like this man is purposely trying to look for weakness and attack his students because of it.

And fuck, as someone who wants to pursue teaching and has found his experience teaching to be one of his biggest highlights at Columbia, does it fucking sting to be blatantly told to his face to find a different major.

Pitts doesn't make any sort of comment or lean over right away to check in on him- Knox feels as if he did he might break his composure on the spot- but Pitts purposely turns his attention towards the front of the room, his lips tightly pursed together. Which Knox appreciates more than he thinks Pitts will ever know.

After Knox gets reprimanded in front of everyone, no one else dares to raise their hand and participate in the lecture, everyone earning a few condescending scoldings from Dr. McAllister for their lack of initiative as a result.

The icing on what is already a burnt cake is when he nonchalantly tacks on that there is a ten-page essay due at the start of their next class on Wednesday, and then, as he is about to leave the lecture hall, says, " Anyone unable to turn in a printed out essay at the start of class on the assigned due date will automatically receive a fail grade on the assignment ."

Dr. McAllister allows the door to swing shut behind him, and immediately everyone in the class starts chatting, the entire room sounding like an angry hornet's nest.

Pitts slowly turns to Knox.

"D oes that offer still stand about afternoon drinking ?"

Instead of having to live in the freshman or sophomore-only dorms, Pitts and Meeks upgraded to Broadway Hall, a junior-only dorm building a three-block walk from the heart of Columbia's campus.

Meeks is gone to a physics lab for the early afternoon, leaving Knox

and Pitts alone with the bar cart Pitts managed to stock to the brim with as much South Dakotan alcohol he could smuggle under the RA's nose.

Knox knows drinking a hot chocolate and baileys a couple hours before his microeconomics lecture is reckless, and that he and Pitts will be on the receiving end of Meeks' motherly reproval when he finds them. But there is a surprisingly reckless part of him that feels like he is justified in indulging a *little bit* .

Justified or not, no amount of alcohol would have been able to take Knox's mind off of the horrible lecture he'd just gotten out of. He's heard from other students he's shared classes with that these kinds of professors existed; the ones who did not like entertaining outside perspectives than the ones taught in their class and that Columbia needed to be " more selective " about the kinds of students admitted into their programs as a result.

Knox had been fortunate that he has never had to have been on the receiving end of one of these professors' lectures.

Until today.

"I t just pisses me off, " Knox hisses vehemently into the cell phone precariously held up between his shoulder and cheek, glaring between his heavily annotated copy of *The Crucible* he has cracked open. " I've never had any teacher in my academic career do something like that, even to another student. I swear to God, this man is *evil* ."

On the other end of the line, Knox can hear Todd let out a breath that somehow captures all of the frustration Knox is feeling.

"I don't understand how professors like that can get tenure," he says empathetically. "I had some teachers at Balincrest who would give me a hard time because of how shy I was when I was younger. They just- I guess they don't understand that publicly reprimanding students almost always has the opposite effect than they desire."

" I t's this whole old guard in the private school and Ivy League circles, " Pitts hollers across the room from his desk. His voice is muffled by a mouthful of one of the rolls he stole from the suite kitchen on the way up to his dorm, so Knox has to strain his ears to figure out exactly what he's saying. " They always are a decade behind the times in the rest of the world and then act like *we* are the batshit ones for calling them out on it , it's fucked ."

“W hat he said, ” Knox is quick to agree , and Todd’s laughter cuts through the other end of the line.

Later that evening, when Knox gets out of his microeconomics lecture, he is tired and has a pounding headache he knows only coffee and a shitty movie marathon can resolve. All his plans to head home on the subway get eradicated when he steps into the lobby of the International Affairs building and sees Charlie of all people lounging in one of the chairs at the base of the spiral staircase. He is clad in his powder blue soccer uniform and electric green cleats, scrolling on his phone with a crease on his forehead as he concentrates on whatever is on his screen.

Knox comes to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, earning him an annoyed sounding, ‘ the fuck, dude ’ from a graduate student who has to work his way around Knox, stirring him out of his confused trance.

“Y ou stalking me, Dalton? ” he calls, making his way over to where Charlie is sitting.

Charlie snaps his head up from his phone, smirking.

“N o, I’m kidnapping you, ” he drawls. “ Big difference .”

Knox snorts.

“I f you’re trying to kidnap me, you’re doing a horrible job; what kind of kidnapper wears neon green cleats out in the open? With all these witnesses ?”

Charlie rewards Knox’s snark with a warm laugh.

“T he awesome kind who brings you coffee after having a shitty day ?”

Demonstratively, he lifts one of the to-go cups for an iced latte of some kind, that has a cartoonish smiley face sharpied into the side of the plastic. The sight of it and the excited look on Charlie’s face, as he brandishes the drink, makes Knox’s stomach do a weird flip.

“H ow did you -“

“P itts told me about your McAllister lecture from hell. That was a dick move of him .”

In the aftermath of his breakup with Chris, it was not uncommon to

find out his friends were talking about his well-being behind his back. While Knox knows it's something that should drive him crazy- and in the first few weeks after the breakup, it definitely did- he slowly started to understand it was his friend's way of looking out for him. Knox just didn't know it extended into Pitts alerting Charlie whenever a mild inconvenience came into his life.

"T hank you, " Knox says, slowly reaching out for the drink and taking a cautious sip. He knows Charlie well enough to know he wouldn't fuck with his coffee- in Charlie's own words that he often would echo to Cameron, ' I know I can be an asshole, but I'm not a complete dic k'- but Knox isn't entirely sure Charlie knows his regular coffee order.

His lips purse in surprise when he finds out that Charlie knows his go-to; an iced caramel macchiato.

The moral of the story: Knox is never doubting Charlie ever again.

" D on't even worry about it, " Charlie waves him off. " Consider it a form of bribery ."

"Y ou do know I'm not grading your papers and Dr. Callahan is, right ?"

"I was talking about the kidnapping thing, " Charlie snickers. " Let's grab your workout clothes from your office , we're heading to Central Park ."

And then, without so much as saying another word, Charlie abruptly stands and books it for the direction of the exit, leaving Knox in his wake.

Realizing he isn't being followed, Charlie spins around to face him, walking backward in a way only he can make look annoyingly effortless. He does an exaggerated beckoning gesture.

"Andale, andale, Overstreet! Central Park calls. "

Knox tilts his head to the side in amazement, only being able to laugh at the ridiculous scene Charlie is causing.

" D on't you have practice? " he asks, and the only thing that makes him rush forward is when Charlie almost collides with some poor freshman . Knox makes sure to hold the door open for Charlie to pass through, corralling his best friend out of the lobby for the sanity of everyone passing through.

“C ancelled! ” he hollers gleefully. A glint of amusement flashes across Charlie’s face, and Knox makes the mental note to ask him more about that later. “ But I still wanted to get some practice in , hence the whole covert operation .”

“ W ouldn’t anyone else have been better? ” Knox asks wearily. Already, he can hear all their friends tittering.

Much to his chagrin, Charlie only beams up at him.

“N ot a chance, Knoxious .”

With a roll of his eyes, Knox leads Charlie on the short commute where the history department has their TA and GA offices. A girl Knox doesn’t recognize with bobbed curly hair is stationed at one of the desks in the office . She gives him an exasperated side-eye upon his arrival that is quickly replaced by a look of horrifying realization Knox is not one of her students, but her TA advisor.

During the entire exchange, Charlie loiters out in the hallway, holding on to his drip coffee and pressing his lips together to try smothering a laugh.

He waits until they’re at the end of the hallway to make a crack about it.

“N othing ever is straightforward with you, is it? ”

“S hut up, ” Knox hisses lowly, which makes Charlie start laughing harder.

They manage to find a little quiet corner in Central Park by the Naumburg Bandshell, where a group of middle schoolers from one of the performing arts schools is holding a concert benefit.

An instrumental version of The Rascals *It’s a Beautiful Morning* acts as their radio during this informal little practice , and while Charlie is running circles around Knox, laughing as Knox is stumbling over his feet to keep up, Knox finds that he surprisingly doesn’t mind getting laughed at if it means he’s doing a favor for a friend.

Good Vibrations

Chapter Notes

> As always, thank you all so much for the positive feedback you have left on the last chapter. Seriously, you guys are all so awesome and it means the absolute WORLD to me.
>
> These chapters are increasingly getting longer and longer, so whoops? You have my overly-excited brain to blame for that, so I hope you aren't too mad about how long these chapter lengths are getting, lmao.
>
> Also, I'd love to give a special shout out to the one and only @auxctor for being the beta for this chapter for me! You are seriously too good for this world and were such a major help to me through my writing process of this chapter. You're the greatest.

Somehow in between the madness that was classes, his part-time job, Charlie's irregular soccer practice schedule, and the ridiculous amount of readings he had to get done for his East Asian mythology class, Knox and Charlie have been in the slow process of brainstorming how their fake-relationship originated to prevent any mess-ups like the one that occurred when they ran into Chris and Chet at the grocery store a few weeks ago.

Given that they didn't get very far into working out the developments of their 'relationship', they used that as an excuse to have lunch Friday while in-between classes at Knox's favorite Thai restaurant a block away from campus, the two of them sharing occupation of a booth in the corner of the room as they finish plotting out the rest of their fake-relationship in all of its fabricated glory.

"So," Knox begins, talking through the mouthful of cream cheese wonton he was munching on. He pauses a moment to swallow. "I was thinking that after you confessed how you felt about me, we would have one of those dramatic kisses in the rain like you'd see in the movies, and then-"

"Okay, no," Charlie cuts him off, making a point of flicking a pea from his fried rice onto Knox's plate with his chopsticks. "I'm going to have to stop you right there."

“Why, is that too romantic for your little five-foot heart to handle?” Knox teases with a sly grin.

He is quick to retaliate to Charlie’s pea attack by picking an orange peel out of his orange chicken with the clumsy hold on his chopsticks and throwing it. Surprisingly, he manages to get it on to the perimeter of Charlie’s plate.

Charlie’s teasing smile falls off his face and gets replaced with something looking a lot more indignant as he points his chopstick accusingly in Knox’s direction.

“Okay, *fuck off*. I’m not five foot and you know that. I’m 5’8, okay? The average male height?”

While Charlie’s talking, there has been a pout steadily forming on his face that makes him look like an overgrown toddler, which only grows more prominent when Knox starts laughing.

“I am!” Charlie exclaims defensively and lets out an impatient huff. “You’re only four inches taller than me!”

“Only when you wear your special shoes.” Knox says, and he has to fight his hardest to keep a straight face.

“I don’t wear- who is the one out of the two of us with a stupid brace on their foot right now!?”

“Touche,” Knox laughs and holds a hand up in surrender. “I’m sorry, what were you going to say?”

“Well, what I was going to say was that *first of all,* you’re getting way too into this.”

“I love love,” Knox explains simply and shrugs at the almost accusing look Charlie is giving him. “And I’m hopelessly single right now. Second?”

“And *second*, if either one of us is confessing their undying love in a dramatic fashion, it’s gonna be you, not me.”

Knox can’t help but blush at the remark, because no matter how much he wants to argue with Charlie’s logic, he can’t because *he knows he’s right.*

Out of the two of them, he was undeniably the hopeless romantic; the

type of guy to plan over the top dates and buy an excessive amount of flowers to show his affection. Charlie, on the other hand, wasn't exactly an emotionless dick, but he was way more casual about the dating scene than Knox was. Hell, he never even dated anyone in the entire time that Knox has known him, settling on flirting or making out with complete strangers at parties to fill in the void of not being in a relationship.

"Well, I figured that this would reveal that even though you joke around all the time about everything, you're secretly a really big softie," Knox explains and can't help but feel like a sheepish idiot now for even suggesting it.

Charlie hums and rests his chin in the palms of one of his hands. "You got me all figured out, huh?"

He says it so softly, with a look on his face that's so foreign to him that Knox feels thrown off guard for a moment.

"I would like to think so, yes," he manages to get out.

Charlie snorts, and just as quick as that look appears on his face, it's gone, and his signature smirk returns full blast.

"Well, I would like to think all that time you've spent alone since Chris broke up with you has put a hole in your brain." he says, and for added measure throws a carrot that hits Knox directly in the middle of his chest like a bullet.

In an instant, Knox picks up a mini egg roll between his chopsticks, ready to whip it at the spot on Charlie's forehead right between his eyebrows, but Charlie manages to get spared as the waiter chooses this exact moment to come up to their table with the bill.

He stands there for a couple of seconds, slack-jawed, and he fixes Knox with a look he can only describe as unabashed horror and disappointment.

"No throwing food in the store." is all he says before he spins around on his heels and walks back towards the counter near the front of the store.

Knox and Charlie sit there, staring after him in stunned silence, before dissolving into a fit of laughter.

"Why couldn't he have come over here when *you* were throwing food

at me?" Knox asks petulantly when he knows for a fact the waiter is out of earshot. "You started it."

"I don't know, maybe the universe just favors me more?" Charlie suggests, and this time Knox doesn't hold back from throwing the egg roll at his face.

They finish up their lunch quickly after that, and Charlie even offers to walk Knox to his European History class as the two of them exit the restaurant, which is something Charlie's never done before in the two years Knox has known him.

"It's on the way to my Old English literature lecture," he explains with a shrug that's all too casual. "It's no biggie."

"Right." Knox drags out and eventually decides to drop the whole thing and go along with whatever antics Charlie wasn't admitting to.

As the two of them make their way down the busy city streets, weaving their way through pedestrians as they complained about some of their profs and finished up going over the details of their 'relationship', Knox was starting to feel great about the progress they've made, him getting yelled at by a restaurant employee be damned.

It made him feel as if maybe they had this thing in the bag after all.

They definitely didn't have this in the bag.

Knox shifts uncomfortably as he stares at himself in the full-length mirror in his bedroom the next evening, tugging and fiddling with the sleeves of his blue flannel as he contemplates what to do with them. Should he roll the sleeves up to his forearms or play it safe and not bother folding it at all?

God, he felt like an idiot. And *humiliated.*

All of his confidence he had the day prior about this had completely dissipated as he began thinking everything over and fully came to realize just how bad of an idea this whole thing was. Not only was bringing his best friend to his ex's party as a fake boyfriend just downright sad, but the likelihood that the two of them could get caught in the lie was something that not even planning out could assure him of not being a possibility. If that were to happen, it'd leave Knox a thousand times more humiliated than he had been at the

grocery store and God- Chet would have a fucking field day with it. He'd probably laugh so hard that he would probably hack a lung.

"You ready to go? Pittsie should be pulling up in about ten minutes."

Knox startles and turns to see Charlie casually leaning up against the doorway into his room, his arms crossed over his chest.

He's got on a black shirt tucked into light wash jeans, a designer brand belt, and his well-worn chucks. It's simple, and would have been a nice outfit had it not been for the white and black bandana he had messily tied around his head. It was a detail that was so Charlie Dalton, something that screamed such volumes about his character, that Knox managed to find himself feeling amused in his bout of nerves.

"Just about. How do I look?"

Charlie bites his lip as he gives him a once over, his eyes scanning his gelled hair, flannel, light khakis, and Keds. Knox feels warm under the unrelenting stare and begins to fidget with his fingers for something to do.

"You look like a long lost member of The Beach Boys." Charlie says with a click of his tongue.

When seeing the look on Knox's face, he quickly backpedals.

"But then again, you always look like that. Not that that's a bad thing, it's actually- I think you'll be a-okay."

Knox doesn't believe him for a fucking second.

"That's it, I'm changing."

Charlie has the audacity to start laughing- *laughing*- when Knox begins to shove him out of his room.

"Whoa, I'm kidding! I'm kidding!" he manages to get out between wheezes and stumbles a little bit after making it through the threshold of the doorway. "Calm down!"

"Yeah, I bet you are." Knox scowls darkly. He pauses for a moment, taking in Charlie's shaking shoulders before he purposely eyes the bandana. "And I wouldn't be talking if I were you. *You're* the one who looks like a seventies roadie with that stupid bandana on."

And, in a moment of pure maturity, Knox sticks his tongue out at Charlie before he slams his bedroom door in his best friend's face. Because even if Knox dresses smart and goes to an Ivy League, he is approximately fourteen-years-old when it comes down to it.

From the other side of the door, Charlie lets out a loud cackle, followed by his somewhat hurt exclamation of, “It humbles my designer belt!”, as if t*hat* makes any sense, before Knox hears Charlie’s footsteps retreating to a different part of the apartment, presumably the living room.

Good. Knox kicks off his Keds aggressively and lets out a noise of frustration. He used to be so good at this. Now, he couldn’t even plan out an outfit for a damn party without being ready to have a nervous breakdown. Jesus, what’s *wrong* with him?

In haste, Knox threw off his clothes and traded ‘the Beach Boys’ look out for a thin black turtle, light wash jeans, and a dark brown suede jacket. After he manages to tie his Oxfords- deciding to abandon the embarrassing brace leg brace he went out to buy after spraining his ankle- he marches down the hall and into the living room with a new sense of conviction. “This better for you?” Knox asks with a pointed raise of his eyebrow.

Charlie glances up from his phone and stands, straightening his posture.

“Loads. The Lennon *Rubber Soul* jacket does wonders for you.”

Knox has to fight a groan from escaping. “Oh, don’t even *start*.” he laughs.

Charlie chuckles as well, his eyes shining. “Couldn’t help myself, Knoxious. Sorry.” he says, though he doesn't sound too sorry at all.

Then, before Knox can even contemplate it, Charlie surges forward and begins to run his fingers through his hair, messing up the neat style that took forty minutes of meticulous maneuvering to maintain.

“What are you-”

“It looks better this way, trust me.” Charlie steps back, his eyes scanning over Knox’s hair, undoubtedly admiring his handiwork. He nods to himself, seemingly satisfied. “I’m not going to have any boyfriend of mine go out to the first party of the year with a gallon of gel plastered to their head.”

“I do not have a *gallon* of gel in my hair,” Knox says. “I only use a quart, *max*.”

“Oh, *my* mistake.” Charlie snorts.

Outside, a loud car horn beeps, being the all-telling sign that Pitts had just pulled into the parking lot. The only reason Knox knows for a fact that it was Pitts and not some complete stranger was the fact that the horn that rang out that was distorted to the point where it sounded like something straight out of *Star Wars*.

Knox raises an amused eyebrow upon hearing the horn like he always does and Charlie rolls his eyes so hard Knox wouldn’t be surprised if he saw stars. He waits patiently for Charlie to grab his jacket from where he’d carelessly thrown it over the back of the couch and they head down towards the parking lot.

Pitt’s blue BMW Sports Activity Vehicle- which he fondly calls ‘his own Millennium Falcon’- comes into view when Knox exits the apartment building and the man himself sticks his head out the driver’s side window when he sees them approaching. “Come on!” he shouts out, excitedly gesturing at them with one hand. With the other, he lays his hand on the horn yet again and keeps it there. “Come onnnn!”

“If you keep laying your hand on the horn, Nolan is going to come down here and kill us.” Charlie warns as he climbs into the passenger seat of the car, leaving Knox to climb into the backseat next to Neil and Todd, who were both sitting there with easy-going smiles.

Absent from the car were Meeks and Cameron, who both couldn’t come due to school-related obligations. For Meeks, he had to work the chairman position at club rush for the American Society of Mechanical Engineers- something he wasn’t all too thrilled about- while Cameron was cooped up in his dorm working on an application to try getting into Columbia’s model UN. Cameron’s reason was an obvious excuse to not go out because he didn’t want to get picked on the entire evening. Knox couldn’t really fault him too much for that.

“That old hermit’s seriously giving you trouble still?” Pitts asks as he reverses out of the parking spot.

“He *thrives* off of it.” Charlie corrects solemnly.

“It’s like his main goal in life is to make us as miserable as possible.” Knox adds. He stretches out his legs and far as Charlie’s seat would let

him, and relishes in the way his ankle cracks.

Pitts makes a non-committal noise, while Todd just frowns. “Couldn’t you just suggest moving apartments?” he asks.

“Trust me, we’ve tried.” Charlie turns around in his seat to face Todd. “It didn’t exactly work out too well.”

‘Didn’t work out too well’ was the biggest understatement of the year. Their landlord absolutely flipped when they had asked, but Knox had a sneaking suspicion that it was because of the number of noise complaints Charlie got them.

“Maybe it’s because you got us seven noise complaints in the two months we’ve lived there.” Knox voices aloud, causing Charlie’s jaw to drop comically and for him to snap his attention towards Knox.

“Not all of those were me!” he exclaims. “At least *one* of those was you, Knoxious!”

“I’d believe it, Nuwanda,” Neil says, tilting his chin up to meet the incredulous look on Charlie’s face with a lazy grin. “You’d constantly get us noise complaints at Welton.”

The hurt expression on Charlie’s face doesn’t go away, especially when he asks, “Y tu Brute?”

“Liberty, freedom, tyranny is dead.” Neil hums back nonchalantly, smirking.

Todd, Knox, and Pitts all start giggling at the dumb reference, which dissolves into loud laughter when Charlie lets out a frustrated noise.

“Fucking hell, Perry, you’re *such* a theatre nerd.” For the rest of the ride, they all chatted about anything and everything, particularly how their first week of classes went. Knox would occasionally shout out directions to Pitts on how to get to Chris’s house, and even if he had to scream a little bit to be heard over Neil’s excited rambling, it wasn’t something he was too bothered by.

Forty minutes of listening to his friends ranting and Pitts’s weird experimental swing music go by, and when Pitts finally parks his car across the street from the modern-style mansion in a suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, Knox begins wishing that an asteroid would come and annihilate the damn planet. *Anything* would be better than having to be back here, in a house he hasn’t stepped

foot in since he dated one of its residents, having to pretend that everything in his life was going fine and that he was in love with his best friend.

“Damn.” Charlie says as they pile out of the car, letting out a low whistle as they all take in the brightly lit house.

“Nice house.” Todd agrees.

Knox heaves a deep breath in an attempt to calm his nerves and reaches out, interlacing his fingers with Charlie’s. While his hands are smaller than Knox’s, they are larger than Chris’s had been and a lot more calloused. Holding hands with someone is one of Knox’s favorite things to do while being in a relationship, so he was a little disappointed that whenever he held hands with Chris, he came to realize their hands just weren’t that compatible with each other. Charlie’s, however, slots into Knox’s with ease. Like his hand is meant to be there.

The thought makes Knox’s stomach lurch a little and in a panic, he decidedly shoves it out of his mind as he focuses on leading his friends up the long driveway. The others make loud commentary about the house and make jokes about how if Chris had any more solar lights aligning her driveway, the place would start to look like an airport runway. A moment of silence falls on the group when they find themselves standing in front of the fogged-out glass door, all of them unmoving and undoubtedly waiting for Knox to be the one to reach out and knock.

He doesn’t.

Neil reaches out and shakes Knox’s shoulder encouragingly, being the first to realize his panicked state. “Come on, Knox,” he says with a soft grin. “We’re gonna be with you every step of the way.”

Knox smiles shakily in reply and hopes it shows the gratitude he’s feeling. The world truly doesn’t deserve Neil Perry.

Another moment of silence falls upon the group.

“Dude, just fucking knock!”

Charlie’s yelling is what finally makes Knox bang a few times on the door. There’s a short delay before the door swings open to reveal Chris, practically lit up like the fucking sun as she stands there with Chet in tow, both of them wearing matching sweatshirts for Pace

University.

The cheerleader and the football player, Knox thinks bitterly. Jesus, it was practically written in the stars.

“Knox! You came!” she shouts in greeting and grins, showing off a set of perfect, white teeth. Judging from the slight sway in her posture and the red solo cup clasped in her hand that isn’t looped with Chet’s for warmth, Chris is a few drinks in at this point, despite it only being a little past 8:30.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Knox attempts an easy-going grin, though he knows his attempts were most likely in vain. Quick for a subject change, he asks, “You remember my friends, right?”

He points a finger back towards where Todd, Neil, and Pitts were all standing a little ways behind him, and the three of them all grin in such perfect unison that it would’ve made Knox laugh if he wasn’t so damn terrified right now.

“Of course,” Chris says, and gives them a playful wink. “Chet, this is Neil, Pitts, and Todd. And you remember Knox’s boyfriend, Charlie. Guys, this is my boyfriend, Chet.”

His friends all holler back their greetings, and even Chet manages to be civil and gives them a quirk of his lips before nodding his head into the house as he spins Chris around and begins walking, a silent cue to follow Chris and him inside.

Huh. So alcohol was the key of making Chet Danbury a slightly more tolerable human. Who would’ve thought?

Knox shares a look with Charlie, who just gives him a one-shouldered shrug despite looking just as shocked as he does, and they step into the entryway of the house. They’re met with a thick layer of smoke and a pink hue that colored the many bodies bustling around the house. Silhouettes conversed in the many corners of the main floor of the house, some pouring drinks while others were dancing wildly in the living room to the steady beat of the trap song that was practically vibrating the walls.

“God, I *hate* trap music.” Knox grumbles and makes work of removing his jacket like his friends, hanging it up on the coat rack along with the other countless jackets that were making the coat rack sway dangerously.

“Okay, grandpa.” Pitts snorts.

“I’m serious,” Knox says while the others snicker. “Trap just is a bunch of… *noise*. Unless it’s explicitly saying anything, I don’t think it’s very meaningful.”

“That’s *the point*, Knoxious.” Charlie all but groans and Knox finds himself getting dragged towards the chaos of the living room before he can even protest.

Knox had only been gone for a minute. A *minute*.

Realistically, Knox should’ve known not to leave Charlie alone for that long- especially at their first party of the year- as he has the weird ability to get himself into just about anything in that amount of time. But dammit, even if Charlie is his boyfriend for the evening, Knox didn’t want to spend his entire evening babysitting him. So, he thought that leaving his best friend alone for five minutes while he went to get a drink would be fine.

Clearly, it wasn’t, because when Knox chances a look at Charlie from where he is in the kitchen filling up a red solo cup with spiked punch, he saw a group of girls had approached the guys, and that one of them was not-so-subtly flirting with Charlie. Usually, Knox would’ve just let the situation be as Charlie came into his flirting element at these kinds of parties, but judging from the look of discomfort that has crossed his face as the girl was grinning at him and- dammit, was now looping her fingers through the belt loops of his jeans- he wasn’t enjoying this girls company for a second.

Knox downs the contents of his cup in a single go, fully knowing that he was going to have to come to Charlie’s rescue. The realization makes a wave of vexation go through him, because why weren’t Neil, Todd, and Pitts *doing* anything? They clearly were standing there watching this whole entire thing play out, so *what the actual fuck?*

“Charlie!” he hollers out, heading into the living room. He tries his hardest to replicate the smile on his face he had at one point in his life only reserved for Chris as he pushes his way through the sea of drunk college students, trying to channel his inner Neil as he tried to put on the performance of concerned, doting boyfriend.

The whole group around Charlie, Pitts, Neil, and Todd turn their heads to look in his direction, however, Knox’s arrival doesn’t make the girl who had her fingers latched around Charlie’s belt loop let go.

It takes all of Knox's mental fortitude not to go up to the girl and pry her hand off of Charlie himself.

"Charlie, honey, *there* you are!" he greets enthusiastically instead.

It proves to have worked just as well. The poor girl retracts her hand from Charlie so fast she might as well have gotten burnt.

Knox tries his hardest to ignore how Todd just spat his soda out in Neil's face and that Pitt's eyes are practically bugging out of his head as Knox snakes his arms around Charlie's waist from behind. For added measure, he bends his head down and lightly brushes a kiss against the top of Charlie's head.

He feels Charlie's body tense up from underneath his hold and Charlie swivels his head to look up at him. His eyes are wide, highlighting the expression of disbelief on his face and his cheeks were flushing a light pink. The look is quick to vanish off of Charlie's face and contorts into a lopsided smile, the rare kind that makes little wrinkles appear at the corner of his eyes. His eyes, which were usually amused or calculating, were practically twinkling as he stares at Knox.

Damn, Knox can't help but think, Charlie is a way better actor than he gives him credit for.

"Hey, babe," Charlie greets with a surprisingly realistic cheerfulness. "The guys and I ran into some people we knew and I got held up."

"I see that." Knox hums and eyes the girl who had been flirting with Charlie. It's scary how easy he falls into the jealous boyfriend role, especially considering that he isn't the type of person who got very jealous in the first place. He seriously needs to tone it down. "Who's your friend?"

The friend in question flushes and straightens her posture in an attempt to compose herself.

"I'm Ginny," she greets and quickly thrusts her hands out for a handshake. "Ginny Danbury."

Knox wants to scream. Seriously, what is *wrong* with this fucking family?

He accepts the hand presented to him and gives one firm shake.

"Knox Overstreet," he says cooly and limply drops Ginny's hand.

Ginny uncomfortably shifts on her feet, staring down into the contents of her red solo cup as she sheepishly asks, “So, uh, how long have you two been dating?”

“Only a few weeks, but it honestly feels like a lifetime.” Knox says, trying his hardest to make the grin he forced onto his face not look too sociopathic.

Pitts snorts loudly, most likely taking Knox’s response as a sarcastic quip. He snorts so loudly, in fact, it makes everyone in the group snap their attention towards him and Pitts attempts to divert the attention away from him by letting out an obviously fake cough to make it seem like he wasn’t laughing. It maybe would’ve worked, if he wouldn’t have done a good ten seconds after the fact. Who the *hell* was he trying to kid?

“How’d you two meet?” one of the girls asks curiously, an obvious attempt at filling the now painfully awkward silence that fell upon the group.

“Well, *that’s* a funny story, really,” Charlie says, taking the question in stride. “We’ve been best friends since a few months into our freshman year at Columbia, but-”

And then Charlie launches into the story, practically verbatim to the way they had planned out the day prior. The story gets gasps and ‘awws’ from the girls in just the right places, and there was no way in hell Knox could have imagined the lower-pitched ‘awws’ he heard when Charlie described their fictitious first kiss, right?

“Oh my god-” Ginny gasps when Charlie finishes telling the story, covering a hand over her heart.

“That is seriously the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” another girl- who Knox learned was named Tina- agrees, causing her friends to enthusiastically nod their heads in agreement.

“It really, truly is. Now, as nice as it’s been talking with you ladies, the dance floor is calling our names.” Charlie slips out of Knox’s grip with ease and sends an over-exaggerated wink back at the group before he grabs onto Knox’s hand and drags him towards the middle of the room. Knox takes a quick look over his shoulder to see that Neil, Pitts, and even Todd are following right behind them, all of them with variations of amusement on their faces.

Charlie navigates- or more like barrels- his way through the crowd

with a weird sort of determination, people parting for him like the red sea. He makes it his goal to stop so they're in the direct center of the room and when he does so he tilts his head to look Knox in the eye.

"*Honey?*" he finally asks, his eyes dancing with mirth and Knox feels his face heat up. "*Really?*"

"I like saying honey more. It's a lot more sentimental sounding than *babe*."

Charlie barks out a laugh. "Knoxious, Knoxious, Knoxious," he sing-songs with a shake of his head. "You're *such* a sap, you know that?"

"It's been mentioned once or twice."

Charlie opens his mouth to reply, but closes it when Neil, Todd, and Pitts stop in front of them.

Knox can't help the scowl that comes on his face when he sees them. "Why didn't any of you say anything?" he demands sharply.

He sends an accusing glance in Neil's direction, who just shrugs. There was a look of what was supposed to be innocence on his face, but Knox knows Neil too well at this point. Neil *knows* something. Him saying, "I have no idea what you're talking about." with that too-innocent-to-be-real smile on his face is even more telling of this.

"*That girl.* Why didn't you say anything to her about Charlie and I 'dating'? That was Danbury's sister and you just let her keep flirting with Charlie!"

"I had no clue it was Danbury's little sister," is all Neil says. "He's your boyfriend, not mine."

"My *pretend boyfriend*." Knox hisses. He hates the look of shocked hurt that's steadily been forming on Neil's face, but still finds that his annoyance over him just leaving Charlie helplessly standing there outweighs his guilt.

As the two of them continue to bicker, Pitts and Charlie attempt to butt in and calm the two of them down, both of them insisting the situation's done and over with. Todd, on the other hand, looks more and more ready to abandon ship and escape to the safety that was the wall of the living room, so it's no surprise to Knox when he pipes in with, "Look, guys, I think I'm just gonna-"

“Oh no, you don’t!” Neil grabs onto Todd’s hand before he could so much as take a step away, he reels him in, a wide grin now coming onto his face. Neil spins Todd around in a wide circle in a way that’s very reminiscent of Jack Dawson, and the way Todd begins giggling the faster the two of them spin makes him the perfect Rose Dewitt Bukater.

People stumble out of the way to avoid getting hit by the pair, who both have such wide smiles and are laughing so loud it was infectious. Knox joined in their laughter, his anger fading away instantaneously. He turns towards Charlie, who is staring at the couple with the same level of amusement. He must’ve felt Knox staring at him because he then turns towards him, fixing him with a raised eyebrow, his lips twitching in an inviting smile.

Knox couldn’t tell which one of them had the idea first, but suddenly the two of them begin dancing, flailing their limbs unrhythmically to the beat of the song pounding through the speakers. It doesn’t take Pitts long to catch on and soon he too is jumping around, way more impressively than either of them were managing.

As the five of them danced wildly on the dance floor, not caring in the slightest about all of the looks they were receiving, Knox weirdly enough thought back to Todd’s favorite Henry David Thoreau quote, the one about wanting to live deliberately and sucking the marrow out of life.

It’s weird he thought of it right now instead of last week when they were visiting the abandoned train station, because he would think that exploring abandoned places would make him feel exhilarated, but no. It was here, at a college party of all places, screaming out the lyrics to Sweet Caroline with his best friends, that he felt like he was finally starting to live true to Thoreau’s words.

The Twenty First Night of September

Chapter Notes

> Me???? Posting a chapter update at a reasonable time and not two in the morning???? Who would've thought?
>
> This chapter is out way sooner than I had originally anticipated, be it because I'm getting excited about the next chapter or because I had motivation, who knows. But it's most likely because of my friend, fellow Ao3 author, beta-bro @auxctor- who not only video-chatted with me for HOURS about our fanfics and DPS, but who also beta read this chapter! They are seriously too good for this world, and have an amazing anderperry fic on here called 'Speak Low' that you guys should totally check out! It's phenomenal.
>
> I hope you guys enjoy this mediocre ass chapter! The next one is going to make up for it a lot more, I pinky promise ;)

“Her nails were filed out into *talons,*” Charlie emphasizes seriously at the end of his recount of the previous evening to Meeks and Cameron, flexing out his hands illustratively to further prove his point.

Today was the first time all week all seven of them had the day off of either school or work, so to celebrate the occasion, they migrated to Butler Library to host their study group. Half drank coffee cups, opened textbooks and Macbook computers half-hazardously covered the table, a testament to the fact that no real studying has been occurring since their boisterous arrival a half-hour ago.

Knox let out a snort. “They did not look like *talons*. They’re stiletto nails, Dalton. My sister wears hers the same way.”

“They were *red.*” Charlie insists. As if that explains anything. “The color of evil and seduction. She was a succubus, I’m telling you.”

From where they were huddling across from him, Neil and Todd’s shoulders began shaking so hard with repressed laughter at Charlie’s over-exaggerations of the previous night’s events that it was beginning to shake the table. Pitts let out a loud snort into the palm of his hand. None of them were being any help whatsoever. As *usual.*

“And then none of you saved me!” Charlie adds, making Pitts and

Meeks dissolve into a harder fit of laughter. “Knoxious had to come to my rescue!”

“I said I was sorry,” Neil says gently, all laughter void from his voice. His eyes were wide with sincerity as he spoke, taking on an almost pleading hue to them. “I thought that as your boyfriend, Knox should’ve been the one to intervene.”

Neil was right. On the entire drive back from Chris’s house- which Todd had to do, as Pitts drank a little more than he had anticipated- Neil had apologized profusely to Charlie, which then led to Knox ranting about how *he* was sorry for acting so aggressively towards Neil after the fact, and the two them went back and forth exchanging apologies to one another until Charlie finally yelled at them to shut up and that he was over it. Based off of this elaborate retelling, though, Knox realizes this was a blatant lie to get them to shut up.

Cameron frowns. “Wait, so you and Knox are dating? Why am I the last to know?”

“That’s all you have to say?!” Charlie explodes, earning him an evil glare from the girl a table over who has a stack of books the size of the empire state building on her table. “That’s *the first* thing that comes to mind when you hear about how I almost got murdered?!”

“*You didn’t almost get murdered,*” Knox says, exasperated. Then, after fully realizing what Cameron said, he let out a short sigh. “And we’re not dating, Cameron. It was just we had to pretend we were cause it was Chris’s party and Ginny-”

“You mean the succubus-”

Knox sighs. “*Ginny,*” he emphasizes through gritted teeth. “*Ginny* is Chet’s little sister.” Cameron nods his head, seemingly satisfied with the answer, and Knox thinks the conversation is finally done and over with.

But then he asks,

“Wait, so you guys are not dating?”

Everyone groans.

“Jesus fucking *Christ*, Cameron-”

The next few weeks of September pass by in an essay-induced blur, being way less eventful than his first week back at school had been. Since then, Knox's coursework has definitely become a lot more difficult, as all of his teachers are far past the stage of going over the class syllabus for the entirety of the hour and were now beginning to prep everyone for midterms at the end of October. Knox couldn't find it in him to be stressed, however, as the leaves in New York were finally to change color, giving more life and vibrant color to his world.

Fall had always been Knox's favorite time of year; the weather was perfect- not hot enough to the point where he felt as if he would melt and not too cold that he had to always go out in layers- the scenery was absolutely breathtaking, and the number of fun fall-themed activities he could do with his friends were abundant, and were things he longed to do year-round.

With the arrival of fall also came Todd's birthday, which- just like the Earth, Wind, and Fire song- takes place on the 21st of September.

Which happened to be today. And Knox was already running behind the schedule from the agenda he had set for himself the day prior.

Originally, his plan was that the second he got off of his long morning shift working at the community library he was going to get a head start on making his homemade spaghetti; his specialty meal that also happened to be Todd's favorite food. However, his plan quickly went out the window when life decided to butt its ugly head in by having. One of his coworkers had to leave work early cause they were sick, making Knox stay behind and work two hours longer than he was supposed to.

It didn't help that those two hours were the worst two hours he's ever worked in his life, as he got yelled at by an old lady because he 'was taking too long' helping out the customer in front of her and then he had to hunt someone down who was trying to smuggle a copy of *Prisoner of Azkaban* out of the library.

And then his car stalled out in the parking lot and he had to get Charlie to come pick him up after the tow truck came to bring his car to the auto shop. Knox absolutely wanted to do nothing more than shove his head into a pillow and scream.

"I mean, things could be worse," Charlie says loftily, sitting on top of the kitchen counter next to Knox while he's bent over a flimsy plastic cutting board trying to mince the garlic.

Knox frowns, halting his movements. The optimist card was usually one Charlie never liked pulling, claiming that people who viewed life too optimistically 'needed reality checks.' So, why the hell was he trying to pull it now?

"*What?* I could *what?*" Knox demands sharply, sliding the minced garlic cloves a little too aggressively off of the cutting board and into the Hunts tomato sauce that was boiling in a small kettle on the stove. He turns and raises his eyebrows at Charlie. "How the fuck can things possibly be worse?"

Charlie stares at him, a dumbfounded look coming across his face.

"Well," he coughs awkwardly. "You could've let that person get away you were hunting down for stealing."

"Charlie, I *did* almost let that person get away," Knox sighs and fights the urge he has to start banging his head against one of the cupboards. "The only reason I caught him was because I accidentally tripped on my shoelace and took him down with me."

Charlie lets out a snort at that, which he quickly tries to cover into a cough.

Knox can't even blame him.

At this point, after the ridiculously shitty day Knox has had so far, he's completely convinced he's gone off the deep end, and that the little tiny jar of Italian seasoning he had to get at the store that one fateful day back in August when he ran into Chris was the sole-perpetrator in the disastrous series of events that have occurred in his life over the past few weeks.

Knox stares down at the jar in question, scowling. "This whole thing is *your* fault," he mutters angrily at it, and Charlie starts cracking up.

Getting a giant aluminum pot-full of scorching hot spaghetti onto the subway without spilling it all over the street like Kevin did in that one episode of *The Office* was a perilous task, but one Knox miraculously managed to succeed in doing.

There were a lot of close calls, and he definitely almost dropped it when Charlie nearly knocked him over in the process of pointing out a person dressed in a *Kill Bill* costume on their train, but he still managed to keep his balance, despite Charlie's insistence that he was

going to drop it 'like the clutz he was.' As the two of them step off of the subway and begin making their way out of the West Fourth-Street station towards the Third Avenue North housing complex, Knox can't help the feeling of insufferable smugness that overcomes his body.

Eat your heart out, Dalton. He *wasn't* the clutz everyone believed him to be all the time.

As it turns out, Meeks, Pitts, Cameron, and Neil are already waiting for the two of them outside of the building, all of them clutching onto bags filled with purple and silver birthday decorations and even a purple-colored ice-cream cake.

They all exchange greetings with one another, and Charlie is quick to delve into telling the others about the series of unfortunate events that made up Knox's day, causing the others to laugh so hard tears were streaming down their faces.

"How long is your car going to be in the shop for?" Meeks manages to get out after he calms down from his laughing fit, sounding a bit breathless after trying to catch his breath.

"I don't even *know*. I don't even *know what's wrong with it*. It just *stopped working*."

And, just like that, everyone's laughter begins anew.

Neil takes out his phone in the midst of his laughing fit, however, his laughter quickly dies as he studies his phone screen.

"Dammit, *where is he*?" he suddenly blurts, and the air of impatience in his tone causes everyone to stop laughing and to turn towards him with variant looks of confusion on their faces.

Neil could've been talking about a few people when saying that, but Knox had a feeling he was most likely talking about Spaz, Todd's asthmatic roommate who was going to sneak them up into their dorm right under the RA's nose so that they decorate Todd's dorm while he was at his last class of the day, which was his Jane Austen lecture.

Knox checks his watch curiously and immediately understands where all Neil's frustrations are coming from.

It's 5:35. Spaz should've been down here to let them in about fifteen minutes ago.

Charlie grinds his teeth together.

“When that little twerp comes down here, I swear, I’m gonna let him fucking-”

Charlie stops himself mid-sentence, however, as a messy mop of black hair emerges from the entryway of the building, and Spaz finally, *finally,* comes into view.

“What took you so long?” Neil demands with a sigh and races towards the now opened door, Knox and the others hot on his heels.

“I-I got a little sidetracked,” is the response they’re met with as they all begin making a quick descent up the stairs.

“With *what?*” Cameron asks, only to be met with silence.

Knox, Charlie, and Pitts all share a look before letting out matching snorts.

Maybe what Cameron had said a few months ago about all of them forming a pack-mentality while out in public *was* true. If it was, Knox truly felt sorry for whoever they crossed paths with.

They walk up one more flight of stairs before arriving to the second floor, and after making their way down a long hallway that makes Knox feel as if he was in *The Shining*, they all found themselves outside of Todd’s dorm, Dorm no. 24.

Spaz unlocks the door for them and swings it open, and Knox can’t help but feel a little bad at the way they all practically shove Spaz out of the way to get inside, anxious to get decorating as fast as possible to make up for the lost time they spent standing outside.

“Thank you so much again for letting us do this, Spaz,” Knox can hear Neil saying as he watches Meeks rip open the bag of balloons he got out of one of the plastic bags so fiercely that it causes all of the balloons to scatter around the floor.

“It’s no problem, really,” Spats replies with a snort.

“*Shit! Help me, Charlie*,” Meeks begs, getting on the ground to pick up all of the rubber balloons.

Charlie doesn’t help. Instead, he’s opening up his own plastic bag to start taking out the stacks of napkins out of it and throwing them

carelessly onto Spaz's bed.

"Just make sure that everything on my side of the room is neat when I come back." Spaz continues from the door, most likely noticing Charlie wreaking havoc on his side of the room.

"Of course, we'll even make sure to leave you some spaghetti," Neil says with a laugh, the kind Knox knows is reserved for Neil's two different types of people: authority figures and his father. It's the laugh Charlie often calls Neil's 'people-pleasing laugh.'

"I also want you to make sure that-"

"Just go!" all of them shout out, not being able to take the nagging any longer.

Spats let out a sheepish sounding laugh at that, then awkwardly moving his hand in what Knox guesses was supposed to be a wave before finally closing the door behind him.

Immediately everyone sets off and begins decorating, and the first thing Neil does is get music loaded up on his phone so they all could listen to something while they work.

Cameron is obviously displeased with Neil's song choice, as he turns towards Neil with an unimpressed look on his face when hearing the opening lyrics of *White Winter Hymnal*. "*No.* You turn that off right now," he demands.

"Why? What's wrong with Fleet Foxes?" Neil shoots back with a frown to rival Cameron's.

"It's *September*."

When noticing everyone's blank stares, he lets out a sigh so loud it causes Knox physical pain listening to it.

"Halloween hasn't even *happened yet.*"

"Aw, don't be such a Scrooge." Charlie coos mockingly. He reaches out to pinch at one of Cameron's cheeks, but the latter smacks his hand away before he can do anything. The slap doesn't deter Charlie, however, and instead, Charlie begins advancing on Cameron, chasing him around the small dorm room while gleefully laughing.

Neil turns away from the scene, shaking his head as he too laughs.

“Knox, you’re gonna *love* our next play,” he says, and even if he’s not facing him, Knox can hear the enthusiasm practically oozing from Neil’s voice.

Knox lets out a noncommittal hum as he clears off Todd’s desk as a way to let Neil know that even though he isn’t looking at him, he’s still listening.

“We’re doing *Only Yesterday*.”

Knox’s jaw drops and he almost drops the pot of spaghetti all over Todd’s dorm room floor with how sharp he turns towards Neil.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“*Only Yesterday?*” Pitts asks from where he is standing on Todd’s small twin bed, taping purple-colored streamers to the wall. It was a comical sight to watch, as Pitts was so tall he had to hunch in on himself so that he wouldn’t hit the ceiling. “*What’s Only Yesterday?*”

Charlie pauses his harassment on Cameron and stares at both of them, nonplussed. A look of dawning realization then comes onto his face a few moments later, and he lets out a weird noise that’s a cross between a groan and a scream.

“Oh, god, it’s that fucking Beatles play, isn’t it?”

“You heard of it?!” Neil exclaims excitedly, his eyes widening.

“My roommate is the biggest Beatles fan *I know*. So, yes, of course, I’ve heard of it.”

“Do you think I would make a better John Lennon or Paul McCartney?” Neil asks the room, his excitement increasing tremendously.

Neil practically lives and breathes acting. If he isn’t gushing over the play he is currently in, he is gushing about the play he is going to be trying out for next. It’s a cycle that goes on and on, and it’s one that is happening right now; Neil’s talking about the future and his next play, despite the fact that his first acting performance of the school year is going to be tomorrow afternoon.

“Personality-wise you’re more like McCartney,” Knox says as he carefully sets down the warm pot of spaghetti on top of an oven mitt so the pot wouldn’t ruin Todd’s desk. “But he was straight as hell and

I'm pretty sure Lennon was bi, so go for Lennon."

Charlie turns on Knox, his eyes wide.

"Wait, John Lennon was bi?" he asks, astounded.

"I mean, he and Paul McCartney masturbated together, so." Knox does a little shrug. "He has to be."

"*What?*"

"Guys, *shut up.*" Neil hisses, even though *he was the one who started this.* "Todd's on his way up. I just got the text from Spaz."

Everyone jumps into position when hearing this. Meeks flicks off the light switch in the room, engulfing all of them in darkness.

Todd opens the door about a minute later, and immediately after Meeks turns the lights back on, Knox and the others scream out 'SURPRISE!' at such a loud volume it causes Todd to practically jumps out of his skin and drop all of his textbooks onto the ground.

Once he calms down, Todd takes in the scene, his jaw dropping as his eyes scan the purple streamers and gold balloons they had blown up.

"You- you guys seriously didn't have to do this," he says and begins to smile.

"It's your golden birthday," Neil says warmly. "Of course we did."

Neil is quick to dish up Todd a plate of spaghetti and soon all of them are on the ground, eating platefuls of spaghetti and ice cream cake and sipping out of the expensive Italian wine Pitts brought while listening to September by Earth, Wind, and Fire on repeat and watching Todd open up all of his presents.

Todd does so while smiling, and he's smiling so big that it makes Knox and the rest of the guys smile as well, and Knox thinks that all of the trouble he had to go through earlier today was totally worth it seeing Todd this happy.

For an early Sunday afternoon, the Peter Jay Sharp Theatre tucked inside of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts was *packed.*

A good majority of the seats in the auditorium were filled, be it by other Juilliard students, family members and friends of the performers

who managed to snag a part in the play, or just random people from the public who wanted to sit in and watch Juilliard's first onstage production for their academic school year.

Knox and the rest of the poets came to watch the first showing as Neil's number one supporters, managing to snag good seats in the second row directly in front of the stage so that Neil would not only be able to make out his friends when he looked out into the audience, but also so that he could see the elaborate signs they have made for him when the time comes for curtain call.

He found himself sandwiched in between Charlie and Todd, which at first was a good idea but was one that quickly proved to be disastrous as Charlie was currently leaning into Knox's personal space, resting both hands on Knox's right thigh to maneuver himself over Knox's lap as far as he could without leaving his seat so he could whisper-argue with Cameron- who was two seats away from him- about Charlie sneaking in snacks while people were still filtering into the theatre. Judging from the way Todd began clutching the bouquet of dark red carnations he had in his hands tighter and how his jaw was beginning to clench, Knox wasn't the only one who was steadily growing more and more annoyed with the seating arrangements.

"The sign right when we walked in specifically says *no food and beverages*," Cameron is saying in the midst of the long rant he set off on, his face increasingly becoming as red as his hair as he gestures wildly with his hands. "You can't just ignore signs in establishments because you're *hungry*."

"What kind of show is it if you don't have snacks to bring to it?" Charlie counters haughtily. "You're just mad because you don't like peanut M&Ms and that's all I brought."

"This isn't the fucking *movies,* Charlie, it's- Unbelievable. You're truly-"

Cameron cuts himself off from his spluttering for a moment to give Knox a look that says *could you believe this?* as an attempt to get Knox to intervene and end the argument for good. But as much as Knox wants to scold Charlie for sneaking in a family size bag of M&Ms into an extravagantly fancy fine arts building when he was just going to spill half of the bag's contents out onto the floor, his hunger gets the better of him, and instead of chastising Charlie like he *should* be doing, Knox reaches for the bag poking out of Charlie's jacket so he could grab out a handful of M&Ms for himself.

Charlie looks insufferably smug at the metaphorical line drawn in the sand and finally leans back in his seat. Cameron just looks like he's flat out disappointed and seconds away from dragging the two of them out of the auditorium by their ears.

Out of the corner of his eye, Knox catches sight of an elderly couple who keep fixing all of them with evil looks, beginning to appear more vindicated and ready to speak up when Charlie and Cameron lunge at the same time to try snatching the bag of M&Ms out of Knox's hands.

Meeks is the one who ends up beating the elderly couple to the punch.

"You two need to cut it out *right now,*" he hisses lowly, and the two aforementioned five-year-olds still their movements instantaneously. "You two argue like you're *children*."

"Well, that's because-" Cameron starts defensively, although Knox never gets to find out what Cameron was about to say because at that exact moment all of the lights in the auditorium shutter off, signaling the start of the play.

He sits down in his seat with a huff and gives Charlie a look like *This isn't over* and Charlie gives Cameron a challenging look in return that says *Do you're worst, Cameron*, and really, Knox wasn't expecting anything else from either of them.

In comparison to the other productions Juilliard has put on, Knox ends up liking this play way more than he had originally expected, and it takes A Midsummer Night's Dream slot as his favorite play he's seen Neil act. While the duration of the play only takes place in one set- that of a run-down movie theatre somewhere in Massachusetts- the script was written well enough to the point where Knox didn't mind the bland set or the lackluster action the play had.

From where he was occupying the center of the stage, Neil continues upholding his reputation as the golden boy of the Juilliard acting department as he puts on an enthralling performance as Sam; a thirty-five-year-old aimlessly going through life as he lives in his parent's attic. Whenever he has a particularly long monologue scene, Knox can't help but spare occasional looks at Todd, only to see the soft yet proud smile on his face that Knox could barely manage to make out in the dark theatre.

Todd's smile stays in place for the entirety of the play, all the way up to the point when the lights come on and curtain call begins.

Knox claps politely when the set and sound designers come out to get their share of recognition and when the other three cast members take their bow, but the second Neil himself takes his step forward, Knox shoots up from his seat along with the rest of the guys, cheering and whistling as loud as they could manage.

In their bout of yelling, Pitts and Charlie hold up hastily made signs that say '*Neil We <3 You*' on baby pink cardboard and Knox can see the exact moment Neil spots sign, as his exhilarated and almost victorious-looking smile turns into one of amusement as his shoulders begin shaking with the laughter he's trying to repress.

Shortly after the lights come on for a final time, Knox can't help but stand still for a moment, relishing in the pride and excitement he feels for one of his best friends having a knockout opening-show performance. This reverie is short-lived and gets broken when Charlie begins to fiercely whisper, "*Go go go*," while attempting to shove Knox out of the row, causing all the poets to crash into each other.

"Charlie, what the hell-" Pitts starts, but then he stops when all of them glance over Charlie's shoulder to see the old lady from the elderly couple duo that had been glaring at them earlier marching towards them, her lips downturned in such a dark scowl it made Knox's whole body shudder.

That one dark look was all the motivation the six of them needed to start sprinting out of the row and towards the back of the theatre where the doors leading to the lobby were located, trying to put as much distance in between her as they possibly could.

"What is up with you guys? You look like you've seen a ghost." Neil teasingly grins as a way of greeting when he sees the six of them burst through the swinging exit doors. He's still dressed in his bright purple movie theatre costume.

"There was- old lady." Meeks gets out in between sharp breaths.

"She was horrific," Pitts adds, nodding his head.

Neil raises a questioning eyebrow at them, however, he doesn't ask them to elaborate further as he catches sight of the carnations in Todd's hands. His smile takes on something Knox can only describe as sheer fondness as he looks at Todd.

"You shouldn't have." he murmurs, awed.

“Well,” Todd shrugs, and a smile that matches the one Neil has on is creeping its way onto his face. “What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t get flowers for your opening show?”

Knox and the others step away to allow for Todd and Neil to have their moment, the couple of the year sharing a brief kiss before enveloping each other in a tight hug.

“You think I can get a kiss too, Perry?” Charlie asks after the couple starts hugging for a little bit longer than they anticipated.

Neil breaks away from the hug, laughing while Todd just rolls his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be at practice right now?” he teases, his eyes dipping down to the light blue soccer uniform Charlie had on underneath his peacoat.

Yeah, Charlie should’ve been at soccer practice right now. However, he had been instant on coming anyway, and all he says in reply is, “Eh, I’m the goalie. I’m certain they can do without me for a little bit.”

“Uh-huh.” Neil hums. He then turns towards everyone else.

The smile on his face hasn’t diminished one bit. Instead, it grew magnitudes.

“So, what’d you all think?” he asks curiously. “Do you think I pulled off the part of a disgruntled middle-aged man?”

The question spurs everyone in to go off on a tangent about *how great* Neil was and *how he put them other bitches on stage to shame*, and how utterly happy they seem to be making Neil at their unabashed support makes Knox feel the most relaxed he has in a while.

As soon as the poets all step outside of the Lincoln Center, Knox departs from the group and embarks on the lonely journey back to his apartment so he could finish writing his essay for his Dimensions of American Education class.

He knows heading back to his apartment early is the for the best- especially considering the fact that Professor McAllister will have his ass if he doesn’t turn in his essay at approximately 11:59 on the dot- but it still pangs him to leave so soon, especially since he would rather be out in the city with his best friends doing dumb shit and making a fool out of himself than here, cooped up in his room with only a half-eaten bag of Sour Patch Kids to keep him company as he wrote about

the importance of children developing metacognition before learning harder material.

“Knoxious! I know you’re writing your oh-so-important essay right now, but open the door! This is kinda important!”

The sound of Charlie’s panicked yelling breaks Knox out of his reverie, and when Knox scrolls his computer pointer to the top of the screen to check the time, he comes to realize that he has been at this essay for about two and a half hours without getting up or taking a break.

Time flies by when you’re having fun, after all. Or so they say. All Knox knows is that if he doesn’t get an A on this paper, he’s throwing in the towel and dropping out.

“KNOX!” Knox flinches at the shrill inflection Charlie’s voice takes on and is quick to close his Macbook, cutting off the psychedelic solo at the end of The Zombies ‘Time of the Season’ playing on his Spotify.

He jumps off his bed and makes his way towards his door. When he swings his bedroom door open, he finds Charlie standing in the hallway, still in his sweaty soccer clothes, and clutching his drawstring bag loosely in his hand. Judging from the sweat dripping down his forehead and the erratic way he’s breathing, it appears Charlie ran all the way from the parking lot to their apartment. His eyes were practically the size of saucers as he stared at Knox, making it clear he was nervous about something. It was a face Knox rarely saw on him.

“Is everything okay?” Knox manages to ask, breaking the silent staring contest the two of them have been having for the past few moments.

Charlie sends him a deadpan look. “Does it *look* like everything’s okay?”

No. No, it didn’t. Jesus, Knox really did have a knack for completely eradicating his brain to mouth filter during the times he truly needed it implemented.

Charlie continues, taking Knox’s silence as a cue to keep talking. “Look, I need to cash in the favor that we haven’t agreed you owe me yet.”

Knox immediately straightens. As much as he would want to make a joke about how Charlie over-assumed, he just couldn’t. Charlie was just too damn nervous, to the point where Knox was starting to feel

unsettled.“*What?* Charlie, what’s going on?”

Charlie takes a shaky breath to compose himself. Then, he speaks:

“Knoxious, I need you to be my boyfriend.”

We Are the Champions

Chapter Notes

> Surprise bitches! You thought you've seen the last of me this week, huh? ;)
>
> Two chapters in one week isn't necessarily something I'm not proud of, but it's DEFINITELY a testament to how much free time I've had these past few days not having to babysit my nephew, lmao. So instead of hanging out with my brother or working out like I've been doing the past few weeks whenever I get free time, I've been inside my room writing gay DPS fanfiction.
>
> A quick disclaimer about this chapter: I've never been to a soccer game in my fucking life or seen one, as a person who has grown up going to hockey games. So I'm basing my knowledge off of soccer from movies and what little I played in gym class when I was in high school. If you're a major soccer fan, I'm so sorry about this, you've been warned in advance.
>
> As always, thank you all for such the positive feedback this fic has gotten! And as always, thanks to @auxctor for beta-reading for me. You're a GOD.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox stands there, taken aback as he stares at Charlie with wide eyes, trying to wrap his head around just *what the hell Charlie was asking right now.*

“If I’m being honest here, Dalton,” he attempts to joke, trying to divert attention from his increasingly reddening cheeks. “I’m more used to being wooed *before* we take that big of a step in our relationship, but I might be able to-”

“There’s a post soccer game party,” Charlie grinds out.

He squints down at Charlie. *“Huh?”*

Charlie takes a few deep breaths, an obvious attempt to calm himself down. “There’s a post soccer game party after my game Thursday night,” he explains. “The team is going out to eat and earlier they were all talking about how they were all bringing their ridiculously hot, successful girlfriends with them, and then when Hopkins asked

me if *I* was going to bring someone with me, I sort of panicked, and-"

"You *panicked*?" Knox echoes, managing to cut Charlie off. "*You?* You're the most confident, laidback person I've ever met in my life!"

"Not my fault you're scared of basic human interactions and I'm not," Charlie shoots back. "But *anyway*, I *panicked*, and I told them that I was going to bring my new, dorky, hopeless romantic best friend turned boyfriend *Knox Overstreet* with me, and that everyone on the team was finally going to get the chance to meet you."

"Why was *I* the first person you thought of?" Knox can't help but ask when Charlie finishes, the thought nagging at him the entire time Charlie had been ranting. "Why not anyone else?"

To Knox's surprise, Charlie starts *blushing*. Full-blown, cheeks darker than molten lava kind of blushing, and- great. Now, Knox went and made Charlie feel embarrassed.

"Knox, I just- *I need you to be my boyfriend,*" Charlie stresses, not even trying to hide the fact he was outright begging at this point. "*Please.*"

Knox thinks on it for a few moments. Then, he lets out a long sigh.

"What day and time do you need me?"

How the hell Knox ended up in the situation of having to fake-date Charlie not once, not twice, but *three times* on *three separate occasions* within the past two months was something that really constituted an award of some kind, be it a 'best friend of the year' award or a 'congratulations, you're just that lonely!' award. Whichever one God decides to bestow him with, Knox would just shove it in the bottom of his closet and keep it there for all of eternity.

He should have known all of his friends wouldn't have been sympathetic when hearing about how he and Charlie had to fall back into the role of loving college boyfriends, and maybe Knox was a little optimistic for even thinking they would be in the first place. In fact, the reaction they got when Charlie hesitantly told them all at their next study group was the exact *opposite* of sympathetic, all of them laughing so hard at such a loud volume it caused them to get kicked out of the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library.

Cameron, in particular, was having a field day with this news, practically bringing it up every opportunity he had over the past few

days. As for the first time *ever,* Richard Cameron had the upper hand over Charlie. And he wasn't letting him live it *down.*

"You know, Charlie," Cameron began one evening while he, Knox, and Charlie were eating dinner in the Ferris Booth Commons dining hall right before their night classes. He was trying his hardest to sound all nonchalant and indifferent, but he wasn't fooling either of them. Hell, a complete stranger would've been able to see through his facade. Knox rolls his eyes and shares a look with Charlie, who looks like he's ready to slam his head through the dining table. "I find it very rich that my joke about how I wanted to pay a girl to be my girlfriend at that Christmas party last year was called 'tackless' and yet here you are pretending to date your best friend because you don't want to look alone at one of your soccer games."

At the time, Knox had merely shrugged and replied with a simple "People change," as he pushed his bangs out of his face. But as the week steadily progressed on, Knox was starting to increasingly get more and more fed up with everyone and the amount of verbal harassment he was receiving, and by the time Wednesday evening came around- which was the night before Charlie's soccer game- Knox was starting to feel like he was about to lose his goddamn mind.

"I'm going to kill you for this," Knox bursts angrily after receiving *another* message from Cameron, sending Charlie a withering glare from where he was sitting on the couch next to him in the living room."I'm literally going to kill you for this."

Charlie turns towards him, midway through a mouthful of ice cream, with an unimpressed look that's practically been engrained on his face for the entirety of this week.

"Kill me for *what*, exactly?"

"The- the soccer game!" Knox exclaims helplessly, floundering with his hands. "If I get one more suggestive message from *any* of the other poets I'm going to *lose it. I will lose it.*"

"I told you I didn't do it on purpose!" Charlie yells back, hugging the tub of ice cream in his lap closer to his chest. "You're seriously getting mad at me about it the night *before*?"

"No, that's- that's not it at all-" Knox fumbles.

"I just want such a good fake boyfriend that it makes all of my teammates' girlfriends resent their own. Is that *too* much to ask?"

Charlie demands with such a fierce seriousness that it makes Knox choke on his spoon, and he laughs so hard that it causes Nolan to start banging on the wall in a failed-attempt to get Knox to quiet down.

The face paint was all Pitt's idea.

At the time, while all of them were talking about the game in their group chat earlier that day, wearing face paint sounded like a good idea. A 'way to show school spirit' as Cameron had excitedly put it, for once in his life agreeing to go along with whatever the group was doing without being too much of a hardass about it. But now, as Knox is sitting in the bleachers of the Wein Stadium along with the rest of the poets watching Charlie warm up with the other members of the Columbia Lions men's soccer team, he feels like a complete and utter idiot. And he didn't even have paint covering the entirety of his face like Pitts and Meeks did.

"Does anyone else feel like the seats are a little more uncomfortable today than usual?" Cameron asks them, making a show out of the way he begins shifting around and hugging the warm fleece blanket he brought with him closer to his chest. "I feel like the seats are really uncomfortable today."

"I think that's just you, Cameron." Meeks scoffs with a roll of his eyes.

Knox really wants to agree with Meeks on this one; stadium seats were just manufactured by companies to make sports goers as miserable as possible and have always been uncomfortable. However, while it was only nearing 5:00 in the evening, the weather had dipped down to the early forties, definitely to the point that it was making Knox regretting the decision to not bring a warmer jacket. So he could see where both of Columbia's academically gifted redheads were coming from.

Knox hugs his arms closer to his chest and hates the sharp shiver that racks his body.

Instead of feeding into Meeks and Cameron's conversation the way Neil and Pitts do, Knox turns his attention towards Todd, who was rubbing his fingers furiously together from where he was tucked underneath the warmth of Neil's arm. Looking at the two of them does nothing but feed more into the fact that Knox wishes he was in a real relationship more than anything in this world, *not* the weird fake-dating arrangement he has had going on with Charlie these past few weeks.

“Don’t you feel like you’re betraying NYU wearing all this Columbia stuff?” he asks conversationally, glancing down at the baggy Columbia engineering sweatshirt Todd pawned off of Pitts for the evening. To boot, he also had light blue and white stripes adorning the apple of his cheeks in a way that mirrored Knox’s own, making Todd easily looked like he could’ve been apart of the Columbia Lion’s student body and not a friend from a different university who was coming to spectate a friends soccer match.

“I go to a Division 3 ranked athletic school,” Todd says, inclining his head to get a better view of Charlie from where he was on the field. “So no, I really don’t.”

That was definitely a fair point.

Knox turns his head towards the field to do the same as Todd, his eyes carefully scanning each of the heads on the field. It doesn’t take him long to find Charlie, thankfully, as he was easy to pick out due to being the only person out of the twenty-two players on the field wearing a neon orange jersey. He’s talking with one of his teammates when all of a sudden he throws his head back, letting out what was probably a loud laugh. Knox swears he can hear the ghost of that laugh from where he was sitting in the front row of the bleachers.

“Hey.”

The sharp nudge Knox suddenly feels to his side makes him almost jolt out of his body, and he looks over to see Neil fixating him with a worried raise of his eyebrow.

“You getting cold?” he asks, a hesitant twitch of a smile gracing his face. “I got this blanket I’m not using, if you want it.”

Knox eyes the blanket held out towards him in question for a few moments before nodding his head and accepting it with a grateful smile. Once again, the universe was proving his point that the world didn’t deserve Neil Perry.

Just as Knox was wrapping the blanket around his shoulders, an alarm sounded out above head over the loudspeakers, signaling the game was about to come to a start.

“Yeah, Nuwanda!” Neil yells, temporarily abandoning his arm from its place over Todd’s shoulders to cup his hands over his mouth. Knox and the others are quick to join in, all of them shouting out encouraging words or a more comical ‘please don’t completely suck!’

from Pitts that makes Charlie start shaking his head to himself on the field as he walks his designated place guarding the goal post.

Soon after Charlie gets in position kickoff happens and Columbia gains possession of the ball, putting the game in full swing.

Knox doesn't know a whole lot about soccer, only playing the game whenever he had to fulfill his requirement of PE in high school, but from what he knew, Knox could tell that Columbia's team was phenomenal. All of the players worked together seamlessly, seemingly reading each other's minds with the way all of them positioned themselves in the perfect place at just the right time.

Michigan didn't stand a *chance*.

Charlie especially was holding his own very well. Despite being at the disadvantage of being the shortest person out there, he found a way to really dominate the field, making up for his short stature by making impressive saves that caused Knox and the others to practically scream themselves hoarse.

"You tried making that move four times in a *row*, now!" Pitts screams at one of the Michigan forwards who tried to pull the soccer equivalent of Lucy's football gag on Charlie, only to be met with disastrous results when the forward accidentally trips on himself. "Come up with something else!"

"BE MORE ORIGINAL, DAMMIT!" Meeks hollers out in agreement, and the two of them are causing such a scene it makes everyone in the vicinity turn their heads to stare at the two of them.

Knox wouldn't be all that surprised if he managed to become deaf by the end of this game.

When the referee blew out his whistle to announce the fifteen-minute break in between the two halves of the game, Columbia was beating Michigan four to zero, and Knox was now feeling too thrilled by Columbia's lead to even be fazed by the cold anymore. Both of the teams on the field disperse towards where the coaches were waiting in the team's respective dugouts with the exception of Charlie- who was abandoning his place at the goal post and making a beeline towards where Knox and the others were sitting in the bleachers. Which *definitely* wasn't a good sign.

"Knoxious!" Charlie hollers out with a hand cupped over his mouth as he bounds towards him, managing to be heard over the excited

murmur of the crowd.

Knox feels someone shove at his back, causing Knox to stumble off of his seat and towards the railing. He looks back to see Neil sitting there, trying his hardest to hide the grin on his face while everyone around him giggled to themselves

“Go, your *boyfriend* wants to see you.” Neil manages to get out, causing the others to dissolve into a fit of snorts like they were a bunch of school girls. Todd slid one of his hands over his mouth to cover up the fact he was giggling. *Giggling.*

Knox really did have the worst friends in the world.

He slides the blanket off his shoulder and throws it angrily at Pitts before making his way towards Charlie. Already, he felt the cold weather leeching back into his body and was longing to huddle back underneath the warm sanctuary Neil’s blanket had given him.

As Knox came up to the railing to rest his hands on it, he realized Charlie was at the tail end of saying something, most likely some sarcastic quip of some kind.

He leans the top half of his body over the railing so he could hear Charlie better.

“*What?*”

“I said I liked your face paint!” Charlie is staring up at him, his eyes crinkling as he laughs.

There’s no smirk on his face, a small little twitch of what appeared to be a genuine smile curling at the corners of his mouth.

“It was Pitts’s idea,” Knox is quick to deflect, not entirely certain if Charlie’s being serious right now or if he’s just joking. “I’m just the judge, jury, and executioner.”

“I see.”

Knox opens his mouth to reply, but he doesn’t have time to entirely think up of a good response as Charlie is suddenly rolling onto his tiptoes to promptly press a kiss onto Knox’s cheek, bringing one of his hands up to caress Knox’s jaw.

Knox feels like he’s stopped breathing, only being able to take in how

Charlie's chapped lips feel brushing against his cheek. The kiss probably only lasted two seconds, but Knox feels as if his heartbeat has trembled a thousand times in those two seconds.

Knox duly notes that there are traces of light blue face paint specks on Charlie's lips when he pulls away to stare up at him with an almost expectant look on his face. He puts a smirk back onto his face.

"Come on!" he then hollers out, and *really,* he just randomly comes up and kisses Knox on the cheek like that in a crowded stadium and he wasn't even going to *talk* about it? "The guys want to meet you."

Knox throws a panicked look over his shoulder at Neil and the others, who are all too busy pretending to not be eavesdropping on their conversation to be of any real assistance, before snapping his attention back on Charlie again.

"*Now?*"

"Yes, now!" Charlie says. "The fifteen-minute break doesn't last *forever*, you know."

That spurs Knox quick into action, causing him to jump over the rail so that he was standing in front of Charlie.

"Show off," Charlie scoffs as Knox straightens himself, and is quick to wrap an arm around his waist, pulling Knox with him down the length of the field towards the group of jersey-clad college boys huddled together.

Charlie's hand on the small of Knox's back pushes him forward encouragingly through the throng of little kids rushing for the bathrooms, and Knox has to fight his hardest to school the flush he feels bleeding into his cheeks at the touch.

And, seriously, what the fuck was up with *that?* Knox is a twenty going on twenty-one-year-old college student who lives in his own apartment and has a part-time job. *Not* some fourteen-year-old girl who was going to the movies with a guy for the first time. So why the fuck was he *blushing so much?*

"Guys!" Charlie calls brightly to the group with a wave, instantly catching the attention of the huddled group.

"Dalton!" a person who Knox recognizes from previous soccer games as Hopkins greets, waving the two of them over a little too excitedly

for Knox's liking. "Over here!"

Charlie quickens his pace at hearing that, now pretty much dragging Knox along through the crowd.

"*So?*" a tall brunet asks the moment Charlie and Knox stop in front of the group, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

And it was with that question that Knox came to the horrifying realization that the Columbia Lions Men's soccer team was pretty much made up of ten other people with the same exact personality as Charlie.

Charlie rolls his eyes. "Don't mind Kev, Knoxious," he murmurs in Knox's ear. More loudly- and with a lot more extravagance- he says, "Team, this is my boyfriend, Knox Overstreet. Knox Overstreet, the team."

As Charlie introduces Knox with a dramatic wave of his hand, he stares up at him with such *heartbreakingly* realistic fondness that it hits Knox like a punch in the gut.

Knox isn't entirely certain what he's supposed to even *do* right now, so he just raises his hand and gives a little wave, only to get a few lewd hollers and genuine greetings in return.

"Ahhh, *the roommate*," Hopkins says with such a mischievous glint in his eye and such a predatory grin on his face that it triggered Knox's fight or flight response.

"Charlie has told us *so much* about you," another boy chimes in, who looked like he could be Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy's *love child*, of all things, with the type glasses he had on. "We were wondering how long it was going to take for-"

"Okay!" Charlie hollers out, abruptly cutting the Harry Potter/Draco Malfoy love child off. "That's enough, Stick. *Seriously*, that's enough."

All of the guys laugh loudly at Charlie's misfortune, but the attention is quick to divert from Charlie's out-of-character embarrassment to Knox, all of them giving what Knox guessed was supposed to be a serious interrogation.

None of it was nothing Knox couldn't handle, but he was definitely thrown off a little bit at some of the questions he was asked, as they

all went from asking questions like ‘what’s your major?’ and ‘how did you guys get together?’ to questions such as ‘who is the kinkiest’ and ‘who is the bottom? I feel like Charlie is the bottom.’

Okay, Charlie fucking owes him *big time* for this one. Having to keep up appearances to Chris and Chet- as insufferable as he was- was nowhere near as tantalizing and embarrassing as this.

“So, do you like the guys?” Charlie asks when the two of them are walking away, a hopeful lilt seeping into his voice as he inclines his head to look up at Knox. His cheeks are a little red, a combination of the cold and the vulgar questions.

“Yeah, I do,” Knox says, smiling a little. They were a lot to deal with- *definitely a lot to deal with*- but he honestly really did. He gives a one-shouldered shrug. “I really like Hopkins; he reminds me of this substitute teacher I had back in seventh grade who never gave us homework and always let us watch movies when the lesson plan didn’t require it.”

When hearing that, Charlie also begins to smile a little bit as well.

“Aw, that’s adorable, babe,” Charlie coos, poking at Knox’s side playfully. “I’m absolutely going to tell him you said that.”

“Please don’t.”

The second half of the game goes just as well for Columbia as the first one did, and they end up beating Michigan 15 to 4.

Right as the ref is blaring the whistle signaling the end of the game, Knox and his friends are running off the bleachers and are crowding Charlie, almost pummeling him into the ground with the sheer force all of them hit him with when corralling him into a group hug.

Charlie puts on the show that he’s embarrassed by them, rolling his eyes and pretending to act like he wanted to pull away from their group hug. He never pulls away, though, and that was an action that spoke louder than words.

“Can you please go change, Dalton?” Knox asks teasingly when the hug falls silent, all of them savoring Charlie’s victory for a few moments. “You stink.”

Or, at least Charlie didn’t pull away until Knox began teasing him.

He detaches himself from the hug to send Knox a look of mock-hurt.

“You’re the worst boyfriend *ever*, you know that?” he grumbles, and takes a few steps like he’s going to walk away from the group. “Why haven’t I broken up with you yet?”

“Come back!” Knox laughs, reeling him back towards him by grabbing onto Charlie’s wrist to drag him into another group hug.

“Why should I?” Charlie demands, narrowing his eyes good-naturedly once everyone pulls away. “What are you going to make fun of me for *next*, Knoxious? The type of cleats I have on?”

“Nah, we should instead make fun of Michigan, seeing as they just got their asses *handed* to them.” Pitts breaks in, and just like that, everyone’s excitement gets ignited once more.

“They weren’t even *trying*,” Meeks agrees feverishly. “They all kept falling on top of each other.”

“No effort at all,” Neil says with a smirk, playing right along.

“It was really pitiful,” Todd chimes in.

“Why do I have a feeling one of those goals you let in was a pity goal?” is all Cameron has to contribute, and the little smirk Charlie gives them is all the confirmation they need, and everyone bursts out laughing.

All of them stand around like that, talking for a little while longer before Hopkins hollers at Charlie and Knox to get a move on and join up with everyone, and Knox sends a longing glance over his shoulder at where his friends were heading off in the opposite direction before facing forward, pressing close to Charlie to try recapturing the warmth he had felt while watching the game.

At first, Knox felt a little out of the loop hanging out with the team, all of them typically not being the type of people Knox would intermingle with at parties, but it didn’t take long for him to fall into the comfortable, teasing flow of the conversation that had been established, all of them laughing loudly at everything and nothing as they made their way down the rapidly darkening streets.

Something Knox quickly came to realize was that while Charlie wasn’t a *completely* different person when hanging out with these guys, he was definitely less inhibited than he usually was when hanging out

with Knox and the poets, and knowing that information made him smile to himself knowingly.

After walking a little further, everyone ended up settling on going to a little hole in the wall diner a five-minute walk away from Wein stadium. The sign hanging in the window was chipping away with old paint, so Knox just *knew* the place was going to be good, and when all twenty of them came strolling into the diner, Knox couldn't help but feel a little guilty at the look on the waitresses face when seeing all of them. But Knox's guilt quickly melted away as he began getting lost in conversations, talking to some of the team members girlfriends who had come out, and was eating so many fries he was probably going to feel like he was going to have heartburn for *life.*

Everything was going fine. In fact, Knox even was confident enough to say that everything was going *perfectly*; Knox no longer felt as if he wasn't some outsider looking in on this friend group, and was now feeling like he was more relaxed around them, now feeling as if he could truly open up and be himself around them.

Until, out of nowhere, it didn't. And it was all had to do with Charlie's fucking *laugh.*

Because every time Charlie would laugh just a little too loudly at a joke or someone's dumb story, Knox felt his smile grow wider and wider at the sound, to the point where it was making his cheeks aching. It wasn't until he fully realized the butterflies starting to settle in his stomach that he realized those butterflies for what they were, and he feels the way his blood feels as if it's freezing is completely justifiable in this situation.

Wait, do I have a crush on Charlie?

Just like that, Knox's entire world stopped spinning and came to a standstill. Then, almost as soon as it had stopped, everything began shifting back into place, remaining the same but at the same time so different and surreal, as Knox now found himself living in a new reality. A new reality where he had a crush on *Charlie Dalton,* of all people. His *best friend.*

What the *fuck. What the fuck, what the fuck, what the fuck-*

No matter how hard Knox tried to shove the thought out of his brain, it kept coming back full force, like a mantra or an annoying song he heard on the radio that he couldn't get out of his head. The fact that Charlie was beginning to insistently *giggle* at one of Hopkins's

outlandish stories about another time he got high wasn't doing anything to help out the internal panic attack Knox was having, and the sound of Charlie's laughter made his heart start beating rapidly in his chest.

Knox shakily gets up from the table, red-faced and desperate for an escape.

"Knoxious," Charlie says. The amount of concern in his voice coupled with the little frown stretching at the corners of his usually smirking mouth made Knox's heart begin beating more erratically from the confines of his ribcage. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah!" he squeaks out, and *no*.

No no no. Knox was *not* going to go and make this awkward like he did with all of his past crushes and with Chris. He *couldn't*. Because this was *Charlie*, not some estranged ex or person he had a crush on in high school that he hardly remembers.

"Yeah, I just- I gotta go to the bathroom," is the lame excuse that comes stumbling out of his mouth. "I'll- I'll be right back."

Out of the corner of his eye, Knox notices the worried look Charlie shares with Hopkins, but he doesn't say anything about it as he's too busy gunning it for the sanctuary of the bathroom.

Knox's first thought when closing the bathroom door was to rush towards the sink and turn it on, cupping the flowing water in his hands before splashing it onto his burning face in an attempt to calm himself right the fuck down. He figured it would work, seeing that he's seen a countless number of people in films and TV do the exact same thing. However, the whole splashing-water-on-the-face trick doesn't do anything and now Knox is left standing here in a public bathroom, *alone,* with water and remnants of the rest of his face paint dripping down his face and an erratically beating heartbeat.

Leaning against the counter, Knox can't help the loud groan he lets escape.

Because Jesus fucking Christ, he was so fucking *screwed.*

Chapter End Notes

> And Knox has officially entered the nine circles of pining hell!
> The amount of sad boy pining you guys are about to be reading in

these upcoming chapters is INSANE, but I hope y'all can forgive me ;)

If I Fell

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all so much for the positive comments on the last chapter! I was definitely nervous about posting it, so I was glad to hear you guys enjoyed it!
>
> This chapter is pretty much just filled with a fuck ton of pining from Knox, and I mainly blame the fact that I was listening to 'If I Fell' by The Beatles on a loop pretty much the entirety of the time I was writing this chapter, not only because it's such a great song, but because I feel like this song perfectly encompasses Knox's emotions.
>
> And, of course, I have to give my obligatory shoutout to @auxctor for beta-ing this chapter! Our hour-long conversations about DPS and the weirdness that surrounds 'My Immortal' never fail to crack me the hell up and they're literally the best. They've been my main motivator in life right now and I seriously don't think my writing would be the way it is right now if it wasn't for their kind encouragement!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It made sense, his crush on Charlie.

At first, he had spent the nights after his initial bathroom breakdown staring up at his ceiling in a sleepless daze, listening to various love song playlists he found on Spotify as he tried to vehemently talk himself out of his feelings. However, the longer Knox contemplated it, the more the events from the past few weeks seemed to make a lot more sense when putting them into the perspective of him having a crush; like how Knox always felt nervous whenever he caught glimpses of Charlie without a shirt on as he casually made his way around their apartment late at night, or how Knox had felt back at Chris's party when he and Charlie held hands, or how Knox felt like the world was swept right out from under him when Charlie had come out of nowhere and kissed him on the cheek.

Knox couldn't help but feel like a complete and utter idiot for not noticing the way his emotions have been subconsciously building up over these past few weeks, and has long since come to the conclusion that the main reason the floodgates didn't release sooner was because

of his breakup with Chris. Now that Knox was single and has spent almost half a year alone, he finally felt as if he was starting to move on from his relationship with her, and- as a result- his suppressed feelings for Charlie started to crawl to the surface like a damned person trying to escape hell.

Charlie being a guy wasn't necessarily the issue for Knox; he has known since his sophomore year of high school that he was bisexual, ever since he watched Michael J Fox in *Back to the Future* with his little sister over winter break. His bisexuality was something he has grown to become comfortable with, as it was something he managed to get support on from the majority of his family, even if his father still thought 'he was going through a phase.'

So no, sexuality wasn't Knox's problem. Instead, his panic was mainly stemming from the fact that Charlie was the first guy he knew in his personal life that he *actually had feelings for.* It wasn't like he was just some celebrity he could admire from afar and catch glimpses of in TV interviews. This was his *best friend* and *roommate* that he had a crush on; the person who made Knox laugh harder than anyone else he's ever met, who always remembered how Knox took his coffee, and who always teasingly looked down on Knox for his obliviousness, but never looked down on him figuratively.

Knox was screwed. He was so, *so fucking* screwed.

Because one thing was for certain:

No matter how many lists Knox made about what he wanted in a relationship concerning Charlie or how many hypothetical dates he conjured up in his head, Charlie could never know.

One of the negative downsides about Knox realizing his crush on Charlie was that now everything Charlie did, Knox somehow managed to find beauty in it. He found it in the way Charlie smirked, in the way dimples sometimes graced Charlie's face whenever he offered a genuine smile, in the sharp angular curve of his jaw, in his *hands* . Everywhere, no matter the situation or how inconvenient it was, Knox always did it.

And it was something he was doing *right now* .

Currently, he, Charlie and the rest of the poets were eating at Knox's favorite Thai restaurant on a particularly busy Friday night in Manhattan. Fridays weren't usually a time when all of the poets got

together and hung out, especially with midterms heavily looming on the horizon for all of them. By the fate of the universe, however, the stars aligned somehow, and all of them had enough free time in the evening to meet up and have dinner. But Knox couldn't enjoy his meal or the flow of conversation like he normally would. Because on the whole train ride into the city, Knox has been transfixed by the nape of Charlie's *neck* .

In an attempt to keep his emotions at bay and not seem like a total freak, Knox has been staring down at his plate so he wouldn't stare at Charlie from where he was across the table from him for the entirety of the meal. He thinks he's doing a great job and that nobody has caught onto his ridiculous crush yet, but he can only pray that's the case; he's never been the subtle type of person when it comes to love.

Dinner so far has been completely tame in comparison to how most dinners for all of the poets go, and not one childish argument has broken out yet all evening. In most cases, Knox would think to himself that he has spoken too soon, but the waiter- the same one who had yelled at Knox for throwing food a few weeks ago- was bringing their bill, along with their fortune cookies, so Knox allowed himself to indulge in the sheer hope that for once, *once* , they were going to get through a regular dinner just like any other normal friend group.

The resounding crack of fortune cookies being opened is quick to fill the comfortable silence all of them had fallen into, and they all take a moment to stare down at their fortunes to read over whatever crazy, out of the water words of wisdom the fortune cookie factories had to offer them today.

Knox feels his face warm up as he reads his over, and it takes all of his willpower not to ball up his fortune and scream.

The love of your life is right in front of your eyes.

Yeah, the universe was definitely laughing in his damn face about his crush on Charlie.

He chances a glance at Charlie and stares at the stupid way Charlie's forehead wrinkles as he concentrates too hard on his fortune, looking down at the tiny slip of paper as if it carried all the secrets of the universe. Knox shouldn't find it endearing. He really, really shouldn't. But God help him, he *does.* Forehead wrinkles shouldn't be *that attractive* .

"Who wants to read their fortune first?" Neil asks the group at large

after everyone has had enough time to read over what fortune they got. “How about- Knox, let’s hear yours.”

No, let’s not, Knox thinks to himself. Out loud, he petulantly grumbles, “I-I don’t think I want to read it.”

“Come on, it can’t be *that* bad,” Todd says

“Yeah, come on.” Pitts heartily shakes Knox.

Mentally steering himself to get laughed at, Knox straights his posture before reading out his fortune. As expected, everyone breaks out into loud laughter upon hearing the contents of his fortune. Except Charlie. Charlie is just staring down at his plate as he finishes his food, and doesn't make much of a comment on any of it.

When the laughter dies down, Todd is quick to read off his fortune.

“Your emotional nature is strong and sensitive,” he says, as he stares down at the fortune in between his fingers, earning a few hums and nods agreement from everyone else.

Charlie goes next, clearing his throat dramatically before he says: “‘Help, I am stuck inside a fortune cookie factory.’”

Knox kicks at Charlie’s foot. “Read us your real fortune, you ass.” he laughs.

Charlie kicks Knox back and he feels as if his heart is practically swelling in his chest when Charlie hooks his foot around his ankle, tangling their feet together. The close contact makes Knox’s soul sing, and he doesn’t dare to move even the slightest bit, for he’s afraid one flinch is going to cause Charlie to retract his leg away. “Life to you is a dashing and bold adventure,” he reads off, with an almost indifferent look on his face that makes it seem like he’s sitting normally and not playing some weird on-hold game of footsie underneath the table with Knox. His complete nonchalance makes Knox feel disappointed. Apparently, Charlie wasn’t as nervous at the contact as Knox was. “Amen to that, I say. Meeks?”

“A faithful friend is a strong defense.”

A few people murmur out their agreement at the wise words, and quickly after, everyone else reads off their fortunes, one by one.

“‘The usefulness of a cup is in its emptiness.’ Mysterious.”

“‘You have an unusually magnetic personality.’”

“Mine’s empty.”

Pitts lets out a cackle that’s so loud it draws attention to their table. Todd and Neil are way less sympathetic and are outright making their laughter known. Knox and Meeks are quick to fall in Todd and Neil’s boat and begin cracking up. Charlie, however, is just sitting there with an almost gobsmacked look on his face, as if he can’t comprehend exactly what is happening to Cameron- or, more likely- the likelihood that this is a once in a lifetime occasion that’s happening to *Cameron* and not any of the other poets at the table who could have grabbed that fortune cookie.

“Oh, *Cameron* .” Neil sighs. He’s trying to put on a sympathetic face, as if he wasn’t just laughing at Cameron along with the rest of them a few moments ago.

“What do you mean, it’s empty?” Charlie asks, squinting down at the small cookie.

“It means there’s nothing fucking in it, Charlie!”

“There *has* to be something in it!”

Charlie reaches out, making grabby-fingers at the cookie Cameron was cradling in his hand.

“Knock it off! Don’t touch my fortune cookie!” Cameron screams, leaning back in his chair to get Charlie out of his personal space.

“I can touch your fortune cookie if I damn well want to touch your fortune cookie, *Cameron* .”

The rest of dinner plays out with the two of them squabbling and Charlie accidentally knocking Todd’s Lo Mein in his lap in a way that then sets *Neil* off, and the scene draws the attention of the entire restaurant and the owner ends up kicking all of them out into the chilly autumn night.

On the way back towards the subway station, while everyone else is arguing with each other about who is the real reason they got kicked out of the restaurant, Knox can’t stop thinking back on was how Charlie’s laugh sounded earlier when he was retelling a story Hopkins told him about a Tinder date gone horribly wrong.

Shortly after Knox and Charlie got back from the restaurant and kick off their shoes, the two of them make a beeline towards the living room couch. Each night so far in October, in an attempt to get 'into the Halloween spirit,' him and Charlie have been making their way through all of *The Simpsons* 'Treehouse of Horror' episodes that were on Disney Plus's *Halloween Classics* playlist.

Originally, Knox had wanted to sit around and study for his Global Cold War seminar while tonight's episode- the fourth Treehouse of Horror- played. His own stupid subconscious, however, foiled his plans, because instead of focusing on his textbooklike he *should've* been doing, he was trying to steal as many looks at Charlie's side profile as he could without getting caught. At this point, Knox feels like he has every curve of Charlie's face ingrained in his brain.

"Fuck, just kill me *now* ," Charlie groans out suddenly, throwing his whole body dramatically against the back of the couch in a way that both obscenely exposes the expanse of his neck and almost makes him tip his Macbook off of his lap and send it scattering to the floor. "Just, run me over. Throw my body into the Hudson. *Something* ."

"I take it you're not complaining about the way that Flanders turned out to be the devil the entire time?" Knox asks with a teasing lilt, trying to ignore the butterflies erupting in his stomach at just how borderline *obscene* the noise Charlie just let out was.

Jesus Christ, Knox really, *really* needed to get laid. And soon. If he didn't, he was going to self-combust. Or join the priesthood. One of the two.

"Oh, fuck off," Charlie says. "McAlister is just being a complete dick tip about this assignment."

Knox nods his head sympathetically. Based off all of Charlie's past rantings and horror stories Knox himself has heard from other education majors, McAlister was an absolute *nightmare* of a professor to deal with. He apparently was stuck up and traditional in a way that was not charming and instead made you want to pull your hair out.

"But Ned Flanders totally is the devil. Nobody is *that* nice and is genuine about it."

"Except Neil and Todd," Knox points out and reaches out to grab one of the packages of Sour Punch straws Charlie brought into the living room. "Even Meeks."

“Todd, yeah. Meeks, *maybe.* Neil, on the other hand, is such a little shit sometimes. Like, Cameron’s outright about being a little shit, but Neil’s *sneaky* about it. And charming. Bless him, but if anyone in the world was secretly the devil, it would be Neil.”

Knox laughs at Charlie’s dumb joke and turns back to the TV, not even bothering to go back to his textbook as he gets lost in the final segment of the episode, taking in the complete absurdity that is The Simpson’s take on Bram Stokers *Dracula*.

Just as The Simpson’s break out into ‘Hark the Herald Angels sings’ a la *Charlie Brown* style, Knox’s phone vibrates. Seeing that he hasn’t done anything productive in the past fifteen minutes, Knox doesn’t feel guilty for how quickly he reaches out for his phone to check his messages.

Knox stares down at the message, baffled.

Speak of the devil and he shall come, is what he thinks to himself as he stares down at Neil’s name lighting up on his phone screen. Fuck, maybe Charlie was right and Neil has been the devil all along.

After Knox reads over the message Neil has sent, Charlie has him fully convinced.

Neil
Hey, Knox! It’s been a while since just you and I hung out, and I never tried that coffee shop you told me about the other day near your apartment. You wanna meet up tomorrow after you get done from work?

Something was up. Correction, Knox knew *Neil* was up to something. The last time Neil had wanted to hang out with Knox ‘just the two of them’ it was when he was checking upon him in the aftermath of his breakup with Chris, and that entire evening was spent by having Neil mercilessly lecture him on his well-being.

“Knoxious, you good?” Charlie asks after about a minute, and for a second Knox completely undergoes deja-vu, as this conversation is starting out verbatim how it did to one they had a few weeks ago, that night when Chris had texted him.

“It’s not another text from Chris asking us to go to some party, is it?” Charlie asks when Knox doesn’t answer automatically.

Knox manages a laugh. God, he *wishes*. That way he has an excuse to hold Charlie’s hand and be able to express his crush freely without

bottling up his feelings inside like he has been the past week or be suspected of his feelings by any of his friends.

“Not Chris, Neil,” Knox corrects.

Both of Charlie’s eyes raise up beneath the fringe of his bangs in surprise. All of their friends texted each other quite regularly in their group chat, but Neil just randomly texting Knox in Messenger instead of on Snapchat was a little bit off-putting, and all the more suspicious. He’s glad Charlie feels just as surprised as he does.

“Yeah? What’s ‘e want?”

“He wants me to meet up with him at Hastings Tea & Coffee just the two of us after I get off of my shift tomorrow,” Knox admits. “Says ‘it’s been a while we hung out just the two of us.’”

A weird look comes across Charlie’s face as he tilts his head to look up at Knox, and all Knox can think is *fuck*. He’s never seen this expression on Charlie’s face before, and it makes Knox’s stomach twist anxiously, like he’s about to chart into unknown, rocky territory.

“If he and Todd weren’t dating, I was going to assume he was trying to woo you,” Charlie says, and even his voice comes out a little weird, too.

Definitely heading into rocky territory, then.

“*Woo me?”* Knox laughs shakily, his attempts at trying to steer the conversation away from whatever weird tension was starting to build up in the room. He’s now starting to feel too hot, even with the cold shiver that went up his spine. “Oh, please. Neil’s just probably asking me to hang out to see if I haven’t gone insane yet post-breakup. You know he just asks me to hang out the two of us when he wants to hound me about how my personal life is going.”

A short silence follows.

Charlie purses his lips, clearly thinking over Knox’s words.

“Okay, then,” is all he mutters before turning back to the TV and queuing up the next Treehouse of Horror episode.

Knox watches him do so with relief that he’s steered them away from an argument. He turns his attention back to his phone and opens up his messenger app to text Neil back.

Knox
Uh, okay? I'm pretty sure that I'm free when I get off work.

Neil's reply comes quick.

Neil
What a very confident-sounding answer from Mr. Knox Overstreet. Should I be offended?

Knox lets out a loud laugh at that before he types out his response, one that grabs Charlie's attention away from the Halloween themed-intro playing out on screen, and Knox grows hot knowing that he's holding Charlie's attention right now.

Knox
No need to be offended just yet.

Knox
You might be, though, when I begin ranting to you about how mad I am you're playing Paul instead of John in 'Only Yesterday' and how I think the Juilliard audition process is nothing but pure politics.

"Christ, Knoxious, I know old people who can text faster than you."

All Knox's embarrassed emotions are quick to dissipate, and he fixes Charlie with an annoyed glare, but really, deep down, he's just relieved Charlie is acting normal again and not. . . however he had been.

"Oh really?" Knox challenges, clicking the 'send' button a little more ferociously than intended. "I'm confident enough to say that I'm a faster typer than Nolan."

"How do *you* know Nolan even has a phone?"

"He definitely seems like one of those old men who spam restaurants with angry, one-star Yelp reviews when the food takes too long."

Charlie shakes his head, and lets out a loud snort before grabbing his box of Cheez-It's off the coffee table.

Knox opens his phone back up.

Neil
I don't know if that's a yes or a no, but I'm going to assume that's a yes based off of the wording you chose, so I'll see you then!

The text is a clear end to the conversation, and the finality of it makes Knox throw himself against the couch like Charlie had done a few minutes ago.

Just what the hell was he getting himself *into?*

The following day, as promised, Knox heads off towards Hastings Tea & Coffee the moment he gets off work to meet up with Neil, still in his sweaty work clothes as he rushes through the warm-wood doors of the cafe.

Immediately upon entry, the smell of roasted coffee beans, custom tea-brews, and homemade pastries came over him like a delicious smelling tidal wave, serving as an unhelpful reminder to the fact Knox hasn't eaten anything since earlier before he had left for work.

He scans the room a moment, squinting at each of the cafe's inhabitants until he catches sight of a familiar head of brown hair occupying one of the small circle tables pressed up against the window.

Seeing Neil outside of the city was a jarring feeling, Knox notes dumbly as he takes in Neil's casual posture, his scarf-encased neck bent as he was staring down at his phone screen, furiously typing out a message to a person Knox could only assume to be Todd. Neil was someone who was destined to live in the Big Apple; like his fortune yesterday suggested, he had an incredibly magnetic personality, not to mention the ambition and drive to really follow his dreams and make them his own. Smaller towns like Westchester weren't capable enough of restraining someone with Neil's personality.

As if sensing Knox's arrival, Neil glances up from his phone and sends Knox a bright smile he can't help but mimic. He nods his head towards the counter, a silent message that he's about to go place an order, but then Neil shakes his head in response, pointedly raising two cups in the air with a smug look on his face that says *already bought you something, bitch. Deal with it.*

Oh, what a little *fucker*, Knox thinks vehemently. He *knew* Knox owed him for paying for his meal at the Chinese restaurant yesterday and he still went and ordered Knox a drink anyway. Why couldn't he have been a meaner person? Why did he always offer to pay for everybody's food all the time? Who the hell even *did* that?

Knox gives Neil a dark scowl, one that makes Neil tip his head back

and laugh in a way that was obvious he knew Knox's anger was partially for show. He then nods his head toward the counter again, mouthing 'food beckons' before spinning on his heels and making his way across the room. He orders a tomato basil swiss quiche and leaves the smiling barista a three dollar tip before making his way over to Neil.

"Hey, sorry I'm so late," he says apologetically as soon as he's within hearing distance of Neil, making quick work of taking off his black peacoat and hanging it over the back of the chair across from him. He collapses down into the seat with a pleased sigh, his sore muscles practically crying in relief. "I had to stay back to yell at this group of teenagers who kept pelting each other with spitballs, and then I had to help this old lady find her dentures she lost in the cooking aisle, and then-"

"Is there something going on between you and Charlie?" Neil quickly demands, cutting Knox off mid-rant. He's almost casual enough to make it seem like he aggressively wants to know what the weather's going to be like tomorrow after asking five times and not receiving an answer, but the way Neil tilts his head to the side and gets this knowing, mischievous glint in his eye as he stares at Knox, makes it all the more apparent that Neil was currently a man on a mission.

The question completely throws Knox off guard, making him open and close his mouth a few times as he tries to fish for a response, and he is quick to come to the realization that *this* is the unfortunate reason why Neil invited him here today. He fucking *knew* Neil didn't want to 'just catch up and stare at the falling leaves outside of a cafe window.'

Try to be natural and suave! He attempts to tell himself. *Don't come across as awkward!*

"No?" is what comes out of his mouth.

Brilliant.

The accomplished smile on Neil's face increases tenfold.

"Are you *sure?* " Neil asks as he leans forward in his seat. "You two seem a lot closer lately than you have been, and the fact that you two *always* have to find a way to pretend to date each other is a little suspicious."

"Why don't you ask Charlie about it?" Knox deflects, not being able to help the defensive inflection his words take on. The waitress chooses

this exact moment to come up to their table with Knox's quiche, depositing the plate down onto their table with a sheepish look on her face before spinning around and walking away from their table. When he knows she's out of earshot, Knox adds, "He's *your* best friend."

Neil doesn't seem unnerved in the slightest by Knox. Instead, he appears to be up for the challenge of countering Knox's attempts at derailing their conversation, most likely seeing Knox's question for what it truly was. "Because he'll lie if I try to ask him about it," he says, giving him a one-shouldered shrug.

"I'm the better liar out of the two of us." Knox is quick to counter.

"You hate doing it more."

Fuck, Neil definitely had him trapped in a corner now. Sometimes, Knox really hated how attuned to everyone else's emotions the entire group was. *Especially* Neil. The dude was like a goddamn mind reader.

"Is there something going on between you and Charlie?" Neil repeats in a softer tone. His eyes begin taking on something akin to gentleness and something else that Knox can only describe as pity, and the sheer softness of his voice, coupled with the genuine sympathy found in it makes Knox feel like he's a moment away from crying.

Knox tears his eyes away from Neil in favor of staring at the table. He shakily nods his head in confirmation.

"It's so, so- stupid!" he clutches at his hair in his bout of frustration. "It came out of nowhere, Neil. *Nowhere* !"

"Knox-" Neil begins.

"I mean, I don't want to get butterflies every time he looks at me," Knox continues miserably, furiously eating a bite out of his quiche as he's talking. "I live with the fucking guy!"

"Knox-"

"Like a few weeks ago he was just dumbass Charlie, my best friend and roommate who was a loud, obnoxious doofus, but then after that stupid soccer game he became *Charlie* , this guy who has the best sounding laugh in the world and who somehow looks hot when he's *frowning* and-"

"Knox, wait a minute!"

Knox stops abruptly, breathing heavily, and sees that Neil is fixing him with an exasperated look.

“Just, explain this to me, yeah?” he demands when he knows he has Knox’s full attention, rubbing at one of his temples. “So, you like Charlie, and-”

“Well, yeah,” Knox frowns. “I thought I’ve made that apparent to you.”

“But you two *aren’t* dating?” Neil asks. “You’re making it sound like you two aren’t dating.”

Knox lets out the breath he was holding. “No, we’re not dating,” he admits, despite how much he *wants* that to be the case.

Neil squints his eyes at Knox in disbelief. *“Really?”*

“Yes, Neil, *really*,” Knox echoes. “It’s not like I can just go up to him and *tell him* that I like him.”

“Yeah, you can,” Neil says gently. “Charlie won’t completely ostracize you because you have feelings for him, trust me. I actually think that-”

“I don’t think I can, Neil. Because if I do, it’ll probably blow up in my face, and-”

Neil lets out a short, miffed sounding sigh, like he’s trying to calm himself down.

“What if it doesn’t blow up in your face?”

“What if it *does* ?” Knox challenges. “I know Charlie’s bi too, so I know him not liking guys isn’t even a problem for me, but, he-” Knox lets out a sigh and takes a sip of his chai latte. “Charlie wouldn’t like someone like me, okay?”

Neil sends a look, a clear *‘what the hell are you even talking about right now’* look.

“I’m not saying it because I’m wallowing in self-pity or anything,” Knox goes on defensively, despite that *totally* being part of the reason he said that. “I just-” he pauses for a moment as he contemplates his next words. “You’ve *seen* the type of people he’s hooked up with at parties, right? I’m nothing like those people.”

Knox’s statement wasn’t just some loose claim that was heavily laced

with insecurity, it was *fact* . Every single memory Knox has had of going to a college party with Charlie- save for the one where they both went to Chris's house- he has memories of Charlie in various compromising positions as he flirted his way into hooking up with blonds in leather pants and mischievous smiles and older, taller upperclassmen guys who owned motorcycles and had sick-looking scars on their knuckles. All of those people were so much more confident than Knox was, and while Knox wasn't an entire stick of the mud who wasn't down to go on any of Charlie's extravagant spur-of-the-moment adventures, these people would've definitely been a lot more adventurous than he was. In short, Knox's personality *paled* into comparison with these peoples. They all made him look so damn *bland* .

"Knox, I think you're selling yourself short, here," Neil says. In an act of reassurance, he reaches across the table and flicks at Knox's hand. "You're a great person, I'm sure Charlie can see that. Also, those people Charlie's hooked up clearly weren't *that* great, since he's never talked about them again."

Knox can't help the little laugh he lets out, because Neil did have a point with that. Then, he thinks about how he just gushed about all of his feelings to Charlie's *best friend* and he's quick to get back on the defensive again.

"Are you going to tell Charlie?"

Neil shakes his head. "No, I'm not going to tell Charlie," he vows. For a moment, Knox is nervous Neil's just bluffing, but then he catches the dead serious look in his eyes, and Knox's shoulders relax in relief. "It's not my secret to tell."

If Neil wasn't dating Todd, Knox might've considered leaning over the table and kissing him for that.

"Thanks, Neil," Knox says and gives him a small smile. "Really, it feels good to finally talk about this with someone."

"Of course," Neil says with a kind grin of his own.

The two of them sit there for a moment, drinking their coffees in comfortable silence.

Then, Neil looks up to give Knox a suggestive look that painfully reminds him of Charlie.

“That only makes me want to ask this question: how long have you been wanting to screw my best friend for?”

And Knox chokes on his latte so hard one of the employees comes over to ask if he was doing okay.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you all again for the comments and kudos you've all left on this fic. I honestly did not expect this fic to get as much traction as it has so far, and I seriously cannot thank you all enough for that!
>
> I also just made a tumblr! So, if you wanna stop by and say hi, rant to me about DPS, or just anything, really, you can find me there @yesterdayandtodayy!
>
> Thanks again, you guys rock!

Season of the Witch

Chapter Notes

> Hey!
>
> Thank you guys so much for the incredibly positive feedback I got on my last chapter. Like seriously, you guys never cease to blow me away with your kind words and I appreciate them more than life itself!
>
> Something I forgot to mention in my previous chapter is that I recently changed the length of my fic from '?' to 17 chapters long, and I'm gonna be real with you guys, this is a complete guestimation about how long this fic is going to turn out and the book can end up being a few chapters longer or shorter than this. So, just a little heads up there on that.
>
> And as always, @auxctor is God's gift to fanfic writers when it comes to beta-ing and they have been SUCH a huge help when planning this fic, and just ranting about life in general, so I have to give a huge shout out to them. Their anderperry fic 'Speak Low' is phenomenal, and if you haven't checked it out yet I highly recommend you go do so, you won't regret it! Seriously, this person is one of my favorite humans on Earth.
>
> Anyways, here is chapter eight, and I hope you all enjoy reading it!

In the following days after his talk with Neil, Knox was starting to feel a lot more comfortable about his crush on Charlie; not only was being able to talk about his emotions with someone alleviating a huge weight off his chest, but being able to be honest and *not* having to lie to someone twenty-four-seven about how he felt was something that made him push through his days with newfound ease.

Knox growing more comfortable with his crush, however, did not take away the fact that Charlie still never failed to take his breath away; the butterflies in his stomach still occurred every time Charlie would walk into a room, and Knox has now come to begrudgingly accept that Charlie could look attractive doing absolutely anything, which was seriously *so* unfair.

As much as Knox would like to continue hopelessly daydreaming

about all the dates he would take Charlie on if he agreed to go out with him, or how good he had looked when he accidentally grabbed one of Knox's sweaters to wear instead of his own when heading out for his night class one day, the official arrival of midterms has forced Knox to put most of his thoughts retaining to Charlie on the backburner.

The lack of free time Knox was beginning to experience was starting to make him stress the fuck out; he was becoming way more erratic and temperamental than usual, was running on about five gallons worth of coffee each day, and had such dark bags under his eyes from a lack of sleep that after he came home Wednesday evening, Charlie had proclaimed Knox looked like he was a minute away from death, which wasn't necessarily the most encouraging words from someone Knox desperately wanted to find him attractive.

It was quickly becoming clear that midterm season was having just as much of an effect on everybody else, as well; the group chat has remained suspiciously dormant since the five days of hell - as Charlie not-so-fondly likes to call midterms- began, and the only reason Knox knew that none of his friends died in some sort of reckless, freak accident was because an occasional Snapchat would break through while someone was studying that attained to something along the lines of wanting an early death, be it by strangulation or having someone shove them out their dorm window.

To put it mildly, Knox was starting to become concerned. Especially since his phone hasn't dinged with any sort of text or phone call from any of the other poets all day. Hell, Knox hasn't even received phone calls from his own *family* since midterms week began.

So, when his phone randomly started ringing Thursday evening while he was studying for his last exams- the opening chords to 'I Feel Fine' breaking through the tense silence that has settled in his room- it's an understatement to say that Knox yells- *actually yells* - in surprise at the sound, flinching so hard in his state of shock that he accidentally hits himself in the face.

Shaking himself internally, Knox slowly crawls up from where he has permanently been glued to his bed studying across the room towards where he had set down his phone on his desk, rubbing at his now throbbing nose as he went.

When seeing 'Todd Anderson' as the name that flashes across his screen, alarm bells start going off in Knox's head; Todd wouldn't call

unless something serious was going on, as he and everyone else in Knox's life knew that Knox liked to study by himself, without any distractions or interruptions.

He instantly clicks the 'accept call' button without any hesitation.

"Hey, Knox," Todd greets, and fuck, he sounds downright *exhausted,* like years of his life have been stripped away from him. Knox is right there with him; if the midterms were this awful this year, he can't even *imagine* what they're going to be like senior year. "Are you busy right now?"

The alarm bells begin honing themselves in, almost becoming unbearable. "What's up?" he manages to ask, straightening his posture as he sits down on his bed, his back digging into the headframe.

What Knox wants to ask is *'is everything okay?'* but he knows he has to gradually build up to asking that question with Todd, otherwise he'll try to stutter out something about how 'everything is *fine,'* when things clearly *weren't.* But it turns out Knox doesn't have to resort to that, because instead of opening up about some drastic, life-altering event, Todd asks, "Could you, uh, read over my essay for me?" in the usual, bashful way he does whenever he opens up to someone about reading over his work, and Knox's muscles relax immediately.

"It's a paper I have to write comparing *The Divine Comedy* to *The Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost,* " Todd goes on when Knox doesn't answer right away. "I would ask Neil to read it over for me instead, but he's off at rehearsal and-"

"Yeah," Knox says, now cradling his phone in between his ear and his shoulder as he opens up his laptop. He begins typing ' *Google Docs* ' into the search bar. "Yeah, of course. Have you shared the doc with me yet?"

"Yes," Todd says, and the sigh of relief he lets out goes through Knox's entire body. "I-it's titled 'Paper for Midterm.' Not very creative, but-" Todd manages an awkward laugh, and Knox indulges him by letting out a genuine chuckle of his own. He pauses, and Knox waits patiently for him to go on. Patience is key when having conversations with Todd Anderson, and it often led to rewarding results.

About a good thirty seconds, Todd finds the words to continue, sounding much more hesitant as he says: "Um, Neil told me about you and Charlie. About, you know. . . your-your crush on him."

The words don't come as much of a shock to Knox; Neil and Todd were the type of couple who were upfront and honest with one another about *everything*, which is something Knox has always respected about their relationship. He knows he should feel a little bit hurt about Neil telling Todd so soon, but he doesn't. Instead, he can't help but feel a little bit relieved about Neil telling Todd about his feelings. It made for one less person he had to completely pretend around. Not only that, but out of all of his other friends, Todd would be the only other person he would feel a hundred percent comfortable with knowing about his crush on Charlie.

It's not that any of his other friends are untrustworthy or anything, because Knox would risk it all for his friends if it came down to it. But his other friends wouldn't have been. . . . *the best* people to talk about his feelings with, so to speak.

Meeks- as much as Knox loved him to death- had no interest in romance in any shape or form, and would have approached the situation in a methodical manner that would severely juxtapose how Knox would've handled the situation. Cameron was *Cameron* , and would most likely give Knox a long, scolding lecture about how 'falling in love with someone in your friend group was irresponsible' and that 'if you were to date and break up it would completely throw off things as we currently know it' and Knox was *not* in the mood to be on the shorthand of that conversation. Pitts would just tease him mercilessly instead of *actually* offering to help. And Charlie-

Obviously, Charlie was out of the question, as Knox has already planned on keeping his crush on Charlie a secret from him until he reaches his damn *grave*.

"Yeah, I figured Neil would tell you," Knox confesses. He now finds the doc Todd is talking about and opens it, and the first thing he realizes is that Todd had managed to make the paper eight pages long instead of the more-likely required five.

"You-you aren't mad?"

"Rather you than Cameron," Knox teases, and is relieved to hear the soft chuckle Todd lets out. "But I'm serious, I'm not mad."

"I, that's-okay. I was just making sure."

The two of them fall into a comfortable silence as Knox begins scanning over Todd's essay, only talking once in a while when he needed further elaboration on the plot to *Paradise Lost*, and Knox

quickly was beginning to feel incredibly self-conscious about his *own* writing abilities as he read Todd's essay, as what Todd considered his 'rough draft' was a thousand times better and more eloquent than any of Knox's final drafts.

When telling Todd this after he's finished reading through his paper and making very minimal corrections on it, he can practically *sense* Todd's blushing on the other side of the line.

"Well," Todd begins bashfully. "I-it's not that-"

"Just shut up and take the compliment, yeah?"

They end up talking for about a half-hour more about anything and everything, Knox willing to bounce ideas off of Todd to strengthen an essay Knox already considered to be perfect, while Knox mainly took the time to rant about interesting locals he's seen in the city this week on the way to his classes. The call wraps up with Todd's promise to look over any of Knox's work if need be. Knox appreciates Todd's kindness, he really does, but-

"My papers are going to look like they were written by kindergartners trying to elaborate on a subject they don't understand in comparison to yours. Just a heads up."

"Goodbye, Knox," Todd says, and as soon as he hangs up, Knox's room falls back into the same, obnoxious silence it was in prior to his call.

He sits there for a few minutes before he's unable to take the silence anymore, so he gets up and comes out of his room for the first time all evening to grab something to eat.

The first thing he instantly takes notice of when stepping out of the hallway is that Charlie has passed out on the living room couch in the midst of studying for his own midterms. His head is tucked against the back of the couch, tilted at such a weird angle Knox is a little shocked he didn't break his neck, and he is curled in on himself with one of his legs dangling off of the couch. His 'introduction to education' textbook is still in his lap, and the TV is still on, playing a *Twilight Zone* episode Knox hasn't seen before.

Knox shakes his head, not being able to help the small smile that overtakes his face at the sight.

It was so weird, seeing Charlie in such a vulnerable position. He was more used to seeing Charlie as a confident, quick-witted person,

someone who commanded the attention of everyone in the room just by stepping into it. Right now, all of these qualities were gone, and the Charlie Dalton he knew was replaced with a softer, more timid looking one, who looked contemplative even in sleep.

Seeing this new side to Charlie, one that took Knox two years to finally get a glimpse of, filled him with an incredible rush of fondness that reached places he never thought were possible.

Knox slowly turns around and quietly makes his way back down the hall towards his room, emerging back out of it with his navy blue comforter tucked under his arm. Being careful to not wake Charlie, Knox practically tip-toes down the hall and back into the living room.

After a few minutes of looking around, he ends up finding the clicker to the TV on the ground, half-hidden underneath the coffee table. He quickly turns the TV off, cutting Rod Sterling off halfway through his 'end of the episode' spiel. He then turns around to carefully pick up the miniature mess Charlie has created; throwing away trick or treat sized Reece's wrappers and taking the textbook off of his lap. Finally, Knox carefully unfolds the comforter and drapes it across Charlie's sleeping frame.

He takes a moment to stare down at Charlie and the way he nestles deeper into the heavy blanket in his sleep, and the movement makes Knox overcome with the stupid notion to bend down and kiss Charlie's forehead. But he can't. He *can't*. That would be too *domestic* and couple-y, and Knox doesn't think he can come up with a good enough excuse to Charlie if he woke up to Knox kissing his forehead that would fall under the guise of 'bros being bros.'

So instead of kissing him, Knox settles on the less creepy option and reaches down to run his fingers through Charlie's hair, delicately brushing his bangs out of his face. Charlie flinches for a moment at the contact and Knox freezes up, retracting his hand away quickly in fear that he had just been caught. But instead of quickly opening his eyes and calling Knox out on it, Charlie just lets out a content sounding noise before stilling his movements again.

Knox lets out a mental sigh of relief. He heads towards the kitchen and swings open his fridge unceremoniously, grabbing the leftover ravioli he had made the night prior before retreating back to his bedroom, not even bothering to heat the food up in the microwave.

Sighing, he collapses back onto his bed and opens his laptop back up

again, getting back to work reviewing over the jumbled notes he has taken about the Lac Long Quân over the past few weeks.

Knox really didn't want to get up the following morning.

His bed was too comfortable, his alarm was way too obnoxious, and the way that his eyes stung as he attempted to blink the sleep away from them wasn't doing much to help resist the temptation of going back to sleep, despite today being the last day of midterms before he began his second set of classes for the semester.

However, coffee also sounded fucking amazing at the moment, and the thought of getting caffeine in his system, coupled with the fact that tonight was when he and all of his friends were going to one of the annual Haunted Hay Rides in the outskirts of the city, is what finally manages to make him get out of bed.

And forcing himself out of bed turns out to be completely and utterly worth it; all of his subways are perfectly on time for a change, he manages to find a twenty-dollar bill floating down the sidewalk outside of the arts and sciences building, and he comes out of all of the exams he had today with a confidence he hasn't felt in an academic setting since freshman year of *high school*.

The good mood he's in carries him the entire journey to his apartment and through the threshold of his door, however, his ecstatic mood completely shifts when he catches sight of Charlie sitting at the kitchen table. He's completely bent over what looks like stacks upon stacks of *mail*, all of it spread out across the entire expanse of the table like some kind of murder board as he occasionally takes a sip out of his Mountain Dew.

Suspicion instantly clouds Knox's thoughts. They *rarely* get mail. And even when they did get mail, it certainly wasn't *this* much. That fact, and that fact alone, was clue number one that Charlie was up to something he most likely shouldn't have been up to in the first place.

Clue number two quickly comes into play when Charlie begins giggling to himself like mad whenever he picks up a new envelope, and that was *it*. Knox couldn't take it anymore.

"Uh, Charlie? What are you doing?"

Charlie doesn't spare him a glance, instead opting to pick up a yellow envelope with squinted eyes.

"*Investigating,*" he replies vaguely. He tosses the envelope carelessly across the table before picking up another one and doing the same sort of inspection to it.

"Investigating?" Knox echoes, coming up to the table. "What the hell are you-"

He cuts himself off as a horrifying realization pops into his head. He's not a hundred percent sure he's even right, but he has to find out.

"*Did you steal Nolan's mail?"*

Before Charlie could so much as get out any word of self-defense at the accusation, Knox manages to snatch one of the envelopes off of the table. It's one of those comical bible advertisements about how 'Jesus doesn't like healthcare' and sure enough, the name 'Gale Nolan' is written across the envelope in bold letters. Knox is torn between laughing and letting out a long sigh of disappointment.

"Nobody was down there, it was fine!" Charlie is quick to brush off. "But, holy shit, his *mail*. It's a *goldmine*. Just from sitting here for five minutes, I figured out that Nolan is a religious zealot of some kind and might have a connection to the Flat Earth society."

Knox hates how completely unfazed Charlie sounds about breaching somebody else's privacy. He also hates how his interest gets immediately piqued when hearing the phrase 'Nolan' and 'flat earth society' in the same sentence.

"You're shitting me."

"Nope, I'm dead serious."

Charlie begins shaking one of the letters in front of Knox in what was supposed to be an act of temptation, the shit-eating look never leaving his face for a second.

"Come onnn," Charlie practically sings, still waving the envelope. "I know you wanna look through all Nolan's weird shit with me."

Knox stares down at the envelope for a second before sighing, snatching the envelope out of Charlie's hand and plopping down on the other kitchen chair to join him in whatever weird occurrence Charlie has wrangled him into for the night.

"Good boy, Knoxious," Charlie says with a victorious smile as Knox

leans forward in his chair to grab another letter, and the way his stomach completely lurches at the phrase is something that's going to remain between him and God.

The two of them sit there for God knows how long, slowly pursuing all of the contents of the table, piecing together tidbits about the type of person Nolan is based solely off of the mail he receives from various religious organizations, nursing homes, and tax statements.

Knox doesn't open up any of the letters, he feels like *that* would be taking it too far. But-

"This feels wrong," he says aloud as he stumbles across *another* 'Jesus is anti-healthcare' ad that he's quick to toss to the side. "Like, is going through someone's mail even *legal?* "

"Beats me," Charlie hums. "But sometimes, my dear Knoxious, investigators have to break the law in order to get to the bottom of things."

Knox lets out a snicker, and then the two of them fall into another comfortable silence, however, this one is quick to get broken when three incredibly vicious-sounding knocks break the both of them out of their reverie.

Terror grips Knox like a cold vice.

Nobody ever stopped by their apartment unless their friends texted them ahead of time. Hell, they didn't even have *friends* throughout the entirety of the building. So that could only mean there was *one fucking person on the other side of the door.* And from the sounds of it, he wasn't pleased in the slightest.

Charlie and Knox share a terrified look.

"Do you hear the knocking too or am I losing it?" Charlie asks.

His question is quick to be confirmed when another series of aggressive knocks ring out, and Knox is now starting to feel like he's going to throw up.

"Maybe if we just sit here, very, *very* quietly, he'll go away."

Knox lets out an impatient sigh.

"Charlie, just get the door!" he whispers fiercely.

"*You* get the door!" Charlie shoots back childishly.

"Why do *I* have to get the door?! You're the one who went in and stole his mail!"

"Cause I'm the one who's going to have to hide all Nolan's shit."

"That you stole!" Knox stresses. "Where the fuck are you planning on hiding all this, anyway?"

"I'm gonna come up with something, just- go! I'll be right there to back you up in a second."

And with that final proclamation, Charlie clumsily gathers all of Nolan's mail and darts off down the hallway towards his room, leaving Knox to stare helplessly at his retreating back as he goes. Knowing a lost argument when it's staring him in the face, Knox begins trudging towards the door, feeling very much like a French monarch approaching the guillotine.

He can't kill you with witnesses around, Knox attempts to reassure himself, and- after heaving a huge breath- he rips off the bandaid and swings his apartment door open.

No amount of mental preparation in the *world* could have prepared him for the sight of Nolan. He's just as much of an intimidating old-man as he has been in Knox's nightmares; a good few inches shorter than Charlie, with piercing blue eyes that look like they've seen some serious shit and an almost completely bald head, save for the white hair at the back of his head.

There was no exact way of telling just how *old* Nolan was, but it appeared as if he could have possibly been a veteran in the civil war, and in his state of fear, Knox can't help but think that Nolan looks scarily similar to Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons.* And that he looks pissed. *Really* fucking pissed. The 'he was going to incinerate Knox on the spot' kind of pissed.

"Hi," Knox practically squeaks out his greeting, completely obliterating the whole 'trying not to sound suspicious' facade he was initially going for. "Is-is there anything I can help you with, sir?"

"I know you did it," Nolan says without any preamble, his lips downturned in a deep frown. He points an accusing, withering hand in Knox's face. Knox immediately takes a step away from him into the safety of his apartment. "You can deny it all you want to, but I know

it was you."

Well, Knox thinks. *At least my murder will be talked about on the ID channel.*

"I'm sorry, sir," Knox fumbles. "I don't know-"

"Oh, *save it*," Nolan spits out. Knox flinches at the cold tone and begins clutching onto his doorknob. "I know you and your. . . *fiance* are the one who stole my mail."

Knox blinks a few times, taken aback. Then, Nolan's words fully settle in.

"*Fiance?"*

"Your boyfriend, husband, *whatever* he is," Nolan corrects gruffly, spitting out each name of endearment so venomously it makes Knox mentally tac on 'homophobic' to the steadily growing list of Nolan's incredibly charming personality traits. "It's bad enough I have had to put up with the *shouting,* and the *giggling* and the loud music every night, but now I can't even grab my mail without either of you two cockalorums sabotaging it."

A tense silence falls upon them.

"I-I don't know what to say," Knox says, because- in all honesty- he *doesn't*. How the hell was he even supposed to *respond* to being called a cockalorum? "I'm a little hurt that you would accuse my roommate and I of going through your stuff when we haven't met you before, but you can rest assured that Charlie and I aren't the type of people who would steal someone else's mail."

Nolan fixes him with a look, one that clearly states he's onto exactly what Knox is up to, and he cannot help but think that things could not turn out any worse.

Things *do* start to turn out worse, however, because all of a sudden Knox hears a voice behind him ask:

"Knoxious, is everything okay out here?"

He doesn't have to turn around to know Charlie is making his way towards them, done with hiding Nolan's mail *god knows where*, and when Knox finally does take a glance at Charlie's face, he guesses the expression he's wearing is *supposed* to be one of innocence. It clearly

wasn't, because nobody's smirk looks *that* sinister when they don't have anything to hide.

Knox fixes him a look, trying to desperately convey with his eyes that now wasn't the time to come waltzing in on their conversation. Introducing Charlie into this already cluster-fuck of a conversation was going to be like adding vinegar to a baking soda volcano.

Knox knows- *knows* - Charlie catches the worry in his expression, as Knox can see the exact moment Charlie decides to completely dismiss what he's trying to tell him and turn his attention on Nolan.

"Why, *hello*," Charlie greets. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Someone went through and stole my mail," Nolan explains as if it was obvious what he was mad about, his face increasingly turning such a dark shade of red that it could've given Cameron a run for his money. "I would like to find out *who*."

"That's a horrible shame, really," Charlie says in a tone that *clearly* stated he wasn't the tiniest bit sympathetic. A bright smile suddenly comes across his face. "Well, if we for whatever reason come across your dumb shit-" he starts, before proceeding to try and *slam the door in Nolan's face*.

Horrified, Knox manages to catch the door before it fully closes, nudging Charlie harshly in the ribs before creaking it back open again.

"We'll be sure to let you know. Sorry for wasting your time, sir. It was nice meeting you."

Nolan eyes the two of them, fixing them with one final glare before huffing and stalking off down the hall to his apartment. Knox immediately shuts the door, and as soon as it clicks into place, he can't help but lean back against it.

"I can't believe you made it out of that interrogation alive."

Knox scrubs at his face, too drained to even come up with a good comeback at this point.

"I can't believe Nolan thinks we're *engaged* ."

Charlie's eyebrows shoot up. "He does?" he asks, sounding a little *too* curious for Knox's liking.

"*Yes,"* Knox grits out.

"Well, I can't really say I blame him," Charlie goes on, and it takes everything in Knox's power to not choke on his spit in surprise. "We *have* been experiencing a lot of sexual tension after all."

What?

Knox stares at Charlie, at a loss for words as the other begins wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, and that was all he had to do to make Knox feel like he was going to undergo spontaneous human combustion. Huffing, he storms out of the room, making it his goal to smack Charlie across the head with one of Nolan's flat earth pamphlets as he went.

For the past hour or so, Pitts has been driving down the same stretch of rural road, occasionally stopping at crossroads and forks in the road before the Google Maps he loaded up on his phone tells him to make a turn. They've been driving in a heavily wooded area for about roughly fifteen minutes, and if Knox didn't know that they were going to be heading out to a small-town haunted hayride near the New Jersey border, he would've thought Pitts was luring them all out here to kill them. Knox wouldn't really blame him if he did.

To fill the time on the way there, everyone took turns sharing how their week went, which was to be expected, and then Charlie was quick to derail the entire subject when he starts ranting about his and Knox's run-in with Nolan, which also was to be expected but was something that Knox really did not want to relive the trauma of twice in one day.

As Knox expected when Charlie started the story, Cameron instantly took on the role of the scolding father punishing his children, while everyone else in the car was excitedly interrogating Knox and Charlie in an attempt to piece together Nolan's backstory. Everyone else's amusement on the subject had an obvious effect on Cameron's mood.

"I just cannot believe that you rummaged through Nolan's fucking *mailbox*, Charlie," he stresses at the end of his long-winded rant. He pauses for a moment to let out a dramatic huff. "You had no right to infringe on someone's privacy like that!"

Upon hearing that, Charlie lets out a frustrated groan from next to Knox that was so loud he wouldn't be surprised it woke the dead. For added measure, he slams the back of his head against the headrest and

lets out another noise.

Pitts starts cracking up as they roll up on another red light. “That is so fucking funny,” he manages to get out, and after listening to the insistent voice of Google Maps’ discount Siri, he makes a turn that jostles everyone in the car.

“It is,” Cameron admits, and- Cameron, finding a prank Charlie did funny? What sort of alternate universe did Knox find himself *living in* right now?- “But we shouldn’t encourage this type of reckless behavior. You guys are seriously so lucky Nolan didn’t decide to call the cops on you. Doing something like this isn’t like throwing toilet paper at a house and running away. This is a federal level felony we’re talking about here.”

“So you’re on *Nolan’s* side instead of ours?” Charlie asks, abashed. Quickly, he adds, “And it’s only a federal felony if you open it. The envelopes remained closed.”

“You know, I’m having a hard time believing you right now.”

On Knox’s other side, Todd’s eyes dart between the bickering duo, looking very much like someone who was witnessing a ping-pong match. Knox was almost expecting Meeks- who was sitting next to Cameron in the last row of the car- to pull out a bag of popcorn to start sharing with them as they indulged in their free entertainment for the car ride.

They continue on arguing back and forth with each other for about another ten minutes until Charlie gets the notification that he got a C on Professor Hager’s physics exam, which just sent the car in awkward silence as Charlie ranted about how shitty of a professor he was.

Once he was done with his rant, practically trembling in his seat, Knox clicked his tongue, and in an attempt to make Charlie feel better, said: “I guess now would be a bad time to tell you I told Nolan your name, huh?”

The attempt ends up being in vain, as Charlie is quick to snap his neck towards Knox to fix him with an aghast expression on his face, and Knox instantly wishes he can take the words back.

“You *what?”*

When everyone stumbles out of Pitts’s BMW and out into the chilly

fall air, Neil is quick to wrangle the group into a huddle, like they were a football team about to face a team of reigning state champs.

“Gentlemen,” he begins dramatically in a way that makes Pitts and Charlie start giggling to each other. “It has been a rough few weeks-”

“You can say that again,” Charlie intervenes, which earns a harsh elbow in the side from Meeks.

"*It has been a rough few weeks,* ” Neil insistently repeats, his grin practically illuminating against the backdrop of the setting sun behind him. “But it has all led to this. After managing to go through hell and back, after tirelessly spending sleepless nights cramming for exams we should’ve studied for *weeks* ago, we managed to come out of it alive!”

“Ease it, William Wallace,” Cameron snorts, only to be shoved playfully by Neil.

Neil continues on with his dramatic speech, and after doing a group hand-stack and *everything*, they head off towards the entrance of the farm, and after showing their prepaid tickets to a cheerful elderly man working the ticket station, they get in line for the hayride, which stretches all the way from where you would board the tractor-pulled wagons a good mile away from the entrance all the way to the start of the parking lot where all of them currently were.

As Knox and the poets shuffle their way through the line, a sharp chill picks up every now and again that only adds to the atmosphere that the people throwing on this attraction were trying to aim for; on one of the projections, Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* is playing, actors are scaring unsuspecting guests while they're in line, and with each step forward, the sound of a chainsaw revving followed shortly after by the sounds of screaming increases, causing Todd to grasp onto Neil’s arm every now and again.

Knox tries to commit every little detail to memory, knowing this was something he was going to be looking back on fondly and reminisce about when looking back on his time in college. Charlie, on the other hand, has a little quirk to the corners of his mouth, seemingly unfazed by it all, even when an actor tries sneaking up behind him to scare him.

“I’m not even exaggerating, I feel like mosquitos are biting my ass *through* my jeans right now,” Charlie says to no one in particular when they’re about halfway through the line, furiously rubbing his hands together over one of the small fire pits placed along the path of the

line to warm up guests as they waited to get on the hayride.

Everyone rolls their eyes in various forms of amusement at that, and just as Knox is about to comment on it, he catches sight of the concessions tent.

An idea begins forming in his head.

“I’m heading off to get something to eat from the concessions tent,” he announces to the group at large, trying his hardest to sound inconspicuous. “Do you guys want anything?”

Everyone shakes their heads and politely declines, but Knox keeps his eyes trained in on Charlie to try gauging his reaction; on the surface, his face remains passive, but Knox can see that Charlie’s eyes are now fixing on the bright red tent in interest.

Bingo.

“I’ll come with you,” Neil suddenly offers, gently pushing Knox towards the concessions tent insistently and away from the group. Getting the hint, Knox begins walking along with him. They’re not even two feet away from everyone when Neil asks, point-blank and serious: “Are you going to ask Charlie out any time soon?”

Alarmed, Knox violently shushes Neil before he sharply looks over his shoulder to see if Charlie heard him. Thankfully, Charlie appears to remain perfectly oblivious to the situation, laughing with Pitts about something.

Letting out a sigh of relief, he turns back around. “No, I’m not,” he admits quietly.

Neil frowns at this. “Why not?” he asks softly, in a tone Knox now likes to call his ‘I know you’re pining and I feel guilty as hell about it’ tone.

“Because. . .” Knox trails off, and never gets to finish what he was about to say when they approach the front of the line and a smiling middle-aged woman in a baggy sweatshirt that advertises the hayride comes up to ask them what they wanted to order.

Neil goes first, ordering a hot chocolate and a caramel apple to split with Todd, and Knox settles on getting a hot chocolate and an apple cider.

As the employee turns around to get his drinks ready for him, Neil fixes him with a frown.

“Apple cider?” he asks, almost perplexed and definitely accusatory. “ I thought you *hated* apple cider.”

“Charlie doesn’t,” Knox replies, trying his hardest to sound casual. “I figured I would, well, get him something since I don’t think he’s eaten since he got out of his midterms earlier this afternoon. And I wanted to cheer him up since, you know. . . Professor McAlister gave him an unfair grade.”

Neil stares at him for a few seconds, clearly trying to process the new information Knox has given him, before his face quickly transforms into an expression that Knox would almost categorize as awed.

“Holy *fuck*, you got it bad.”

And really, Neil didn’t need to tell Knox twice.

Just as soon as the woman disappeared she returned, holding two steaming cups of styrofoam in both of her hands with a wide smile on her face. Knox thanks the woman with a smile to match, and after Neil gets everything that he orders, they head back to where everyone was now standing a few feet ahead of where they were previously. Neil wraps an arm loosely around Todd’s waist and bestows the caramel apple in front of Todd’s face with a wide grin.

Seeing the gesture fills Knox with a newfound sense of confidence, and he takes a few steps towards where Charlie is still laughing with Pitts.

You can do this, he attempts to motivate himself. *It’s not like Charlie was going to pass up an offer on food, for God’s sake.*

“Hey, Nuwanda,” Knox greets, aiming for casual as he knocks his shoulder into Charlie’s.

Charlie turns around at the contact, and when taking in the sight of Knox, his features immediately soften.

“Is- is that for me?” he asks, uncharacteristically tentative as his eyes glance down to Knox’s hand.

All Knox can do is bob his head up and down as he shakily holds out the styrofoam cup towards Charlie like it’s some sort of sacrificial offering. He’s lucky it’s dark out, as Knox feels like his face is so damn

red right now, however, it wouldn't have been too out of the realm of reality if his face began to glow in the dark.

"Yeah," Knox coughs. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see the other poets are shuffling ahead of them in the line. "However, if you don't want it I'm sure-"

"No!" Charlie's quick to rush. "No, don't worry about it. I want it." He gives Knox a smile that shows off his dimples and teasingly nudges him as he walks past to catch up with the others, taking the cup out of Knox's hand as he does so. "Danke Shön."

"De nada," Knox is quick to reply, and finally begins moving to catch up with everyone when a person behind him yells at him to hurry it up.

As per usual, the hayride is a blast, and Knox is confident enough to say that they really outdid themselves this year; each set was tastefully done, and the transition from one scene to the next was almost seamless, making Knox feel as if he was the main character in one of those cheesy slasher films Charlie makes him watch every Halloween. Not only that, but Knox thinks that the actors who were volunteering this year should get some sort of money for the time they put into this thing, as one of them went out of their way to jump onto the trailer to come up and scare Cameron after he loudly grumbled, "They're *actors*. It's not like they're actually gonna jump up here and scare us."

All of them were still laughing about Cameron's misfortune as they got off the tractor, and while the employee driving the tractor smiles at them and wishes them all a good night, Knox was positive he was just smiling from the sheer relief of not having to deal with any of them for the remainder of the night.

They aimlessly begin walking down the sidewalk towards the barn where the haunted houses were set up, laughing and shoving each other while they rave about the attraction, and it's not until they're standing in front of the building that Todd comes to a halt, his face blanching considerably as they watch a group of young teenage girls squeal as they rush out of the exit.

One of the main things about Todd that Knox quickly realized after meeting him was that he absolutely *hated* getting scared on purpose, making it obvious that he hates horror movies and amusement parks. The fact that year after year he agreed to go to this haunted hayride

with all of them because he knew just how much fun they all had at this thing made him an absolute trooper, so when he stutters out a, “I-I think I want to sit this one out,” nobody dares to try goading him into going inside with them.

Neil, being the ever-supportive boyfriend, takes a step away from the group to hold onto his hands. “How about I come with you so you don’t gotta wait alone?” he suggests, grinning confidently.

Todd gives Neil this look as he cants his head up a tiny bit to stare at him in the eye, like he’s falling in love with him all over again. Knox would’ve been right there with him if he was Todd in the situations; besides Charlie, Neil was the biggest haunted house enthusiast of the whole group, so giving up going through it to spend time with his boyfriend was a big deal.

“Are you sure?” he asks. “I don’t want to be the reason you get held up from going inside- if you want to go, I can just wait on the bench near the exit or something.”

“That’s nonsense,” Neil shakes his head, his smile not fading for a second. “We could grab some more hot chocolate and watch everyone get scared shitless by the actors in line, yeah?”

Todd flashes a wide grin of his own, and then the two of them step out of line, but don’t stray far enough away so that they can still talk to everyone else as they slowly make their way towards the entrance of the building.

Right when they’re just a group away from getting in, Neil suddenly shouts out: “Knox! Charlie! Can I get your guys’ input on something?”

Dread immediately fills Knox’s stomach, because Jesus Christ, if Neil just so much as breathes a *syllable* about anything involving a possible relationship between the two of them, he is going to be having some serious *words* with him.

Knox shoots Neil a look of warning, but Charlie remains the everso face of nonchalance from next to him as he says “Yeah, what’s up?”

“So, I had some questions about my portrayal as Paul McCartney for *Only Yesterday*,” Neil begins. “And was wondering if you guys could give me some input on it?”

“Uh, sure?” Charlie laughs. “But Knox is the person who's going to be more helpful, so I would just settle for asking him.”

Knox lets out a companionable peal of laughter, and as excited as he is that he's able to help out Neil with practicing for one of his upcoming roles, he mainly just feels confused, because why was he suddenly asking for his help *now?*

"Neil, I'm more than happy to give you input, but couldn't Charlie and I do it after-"

"Just the two of you, then?" a new voice interrupts Knox before he can finish his train of thought. He turns around to come face to face with a girl that had to be around their age. Judging from the baggy hayride sweatshirt and the hat advertising the farm's apples, she had to have been the employee in charge of running the flow of traffic going through the entrance of the haunted house.

"Oh, no," Knox laughs. "We're with-" he stops short when catching sight of Cameron's head further ahead past the woman in the haunted house. The door cutting the house off from the outside world closing behind them, which was now acting as a barrier between Knox and the rest of his friends.

All of this quickly makes him quickly come to the realization that everyone else has gone inside already, and that Neil purposely distracted Knox and Charlie in some- some sort of *matchmaking attempt* - that has now resulted in Knox having to embark through a haunted house *alone* with the idiot he had a completely hopeless crush on.

Neil must realize Knox has figured out what he's been up to, because he suddenly spins around and hooks an arm around Todd's waist, whistling out a tune that distinctly sounded like 'You're Welcome' from *Moana* as the two of them walk off towards the concessions tent on the other side of the barn.

Knox takes a moment to glare daggers at Neil's back. If he ends up coming out of this thing alive, he was absolutely going to *throttle* him.

Knox turns back to the woman and hopes he doesn't like a man who's out for murder as he says, "Yeah, it's just gonna be the two of us."

"Alright then," the woman tells them, the smile never leaving her face for a second. And that was just another thing that was starting to set Knox off. Because why was everyone who ran this damn thing *so damn happy about everything*? "If you just wait out here for a little bit while the group ahead of you makes their way into the haunted house, I'll be ready to send you in."

Knox nods his head politely and Charlie manages to give her a well-mannered smirk.

She stares at the two of them for a few seconds before speaking again.

“You two make a really lovely couple, by the way,” she says, a tad bashful, before going up to the group of teenagers behind them as if nothing ever happened.

Oh, yeah, Neil was going to be *dead* after this. He sure hopes Todd had one last good evening with his boyfriend, because the second Knox gets out of this haunted house, he was going to *murder him*.

Knox feels like his face is *on fire*, and when he turns to attempt to laugh off the comment, he notices Charlie is staring at the ground with a blush tinting his cheeks as well.

“Do we naturally just look like a couple to everyone we meet or what?” Charlie asks, kicking a pebble with his boot in a clear attempt to look in every direction but at Knox.

All Knox can do is let out a nervous laugh, and then, before he’s even ready, another employee- a man in his late thirties- ushers the two of them through the doors of the house, sending them off with nothing but a good-natured “good luck!” before slamming the door right behind them.

As the two of them make their way through the first room- which looks like how he imagined Frankeine’s lab when he read the book in his AP Literature class senior year but on *steroids* - he thinks that he’s going to do fine this year; usually, when he went through haunted houses in years past with Chris, he would take on the role as the protector, the person to shield her away from all of the harm the actors have to throw at them as they shakily made their way through the house.

However, his confident, wishful thinking quickly proves to *not* be the case, as both him and Charlie haven’t even exited the room when someone jumps out from behind a hidden wall and grabs onto Knox’s shoulders, practically scaring him shitless and making him already feel like he’s starting to lose his goddamn mind. Another hand reaches out from underneath one of the floorboards to trip him, causing him to stumble into Charlie, and just like that, in the span of about fifteen seconds, it has become abundantly clear that little 5’8 Charlie Dalton was going to be filling the role of ‘protector shielding their companion from harm’ instead of him, and it was something that makes him feel

fucking *ashamed*.

“You *know* that all of this stuff is complete bullshit, right?” Charlie asks as the two of them exit the second room- something Knox could only describe as *Saw* meets *American Horror Story Freak Show* - only find themselves making their way down a long hallway, strobe lights being the only source of light to go off of.

It was a clear attempt to try and make Knox feel better, but all he can think as he hesitantly reaches out to feel along the wall as he walks is seriously*, fuck this place.*

“That’s not really helping me out, here, Charlie,” Knox manages to get out, right before a little girl who looks like she’s been waterlogged comes out from one of the pillars lining the hallway, her skin blue and looking as if it was decaying.

“What’s your name, sir?” the little girl asks, and all shame Knox has been feeling goes out the window: he *shrieks* .

Charlie’s arms went over Knox’s stomach as he dragged him a few steps backwards, as if he was trying to shield him from the little girl. The gesture was way less platonic than usual touches between them, and the realization would have completely filled Knox’s soul if it wasn’t for the fact Charlie was downright *laughing* at him right now as the duo clumsily stumbles away from the actor.

The little girl blinks at him for a few moments, stunned, before she breaks character and bursts out laughing.

“Sorry about my friend, oh long-forgotten spirit!” Charlie hollers out as they make their way around her. “He’s a little jumpy, if you couldn’t tell!”

“Jumpy or not, he’s not going to survive much longer,” the girl cackles before she ominously creeps back behind the pillar, getting ready to scare shitless the next poor, unsuspecting soul who was going to be making their way down this hallway.

“I love the nihilism!” Charlie calls back behind him before they step through the threshold of the next room, a sort of zombie roller rink where little kids were all singing way creepier versions to nursery rhymes as they skated around in grotesque looking makeup. Finally letting go of Knox’s waist, Charlie turns to him and lowly whispers, “If you pass out in here, I hope you realize I’m not going to be able to carry you back to Pitts’s car.”

“I didn’t think you knew what nihilism *meant*,” Knox shoots back, and then they’re once again back to plowing through the haunted house head-on.

For Knox, the remainder of the maze is just like how it was at the beginning, with him shrieking at all of the actors who swung at them and tugging onto Charlie’s sleeve, and when he two of them step through the exit and back out into civilization, Knox almost cries tears of relief, never being more grateful to step out into the freezing cold in his entire *life*.

He catches sight of all the poets talking amongst themselves as they stare at the exit, however, their chattering instantly comes to a stop when they realize Knox and Charlie are making their way towards them. Which *definitely* wasn’t suspicious or anything.

“Enjoy the house?” Neil grins innocently, pushing himself off of the wooden fence he was leaning up against, the remnants of a styrofoam cup in hand.

“Yeah, it was a blast!” Charlie says, way too enthusiastically at the same time Knox exclaims an annoyed “Fuck you, Neil!” that sends everyone into a fit of laughter.

“Come on, it couldn’t have been *that* bad,” Neil says, still chuckling to himself.

Wordlessly, everyone was now beginning to make their way back towards the parking lot where Pitts had parked, the promise of food at one of the bar lounges Todd had spotted on their way out here an all too real motivator to make them walk quickly out of the cold.

“It really was,” Charlie goes on. “I had to stand in between him and one of the child actors so he wouldn’t reflex-punch her.”

Knox rolls his eyes as everyone begins to laugh harder, and as the conversation quickly transitions to excitement when everyone finds about Meeks managed to score a 102 percent on one of his exams, Knox can’t help but thinks to himself that after how grueling midterms have been for all of them this past week, that this chaotic but well-deserved peace was something he hoped was going to remain in place for the rest of the year.

But of course, since the gods apparently wanted to spice up Knox’s life, things did not end up as relaxing and peaceful as he hoped they would.

We Can Work It Out

Chapter Summary

Angst and a fuck ton of phone calls. . . that's really the best way I can describe this chapter

Chapter Notes

Hey!

I'm going to start off this author's note by saying how incredibly sorry I am that this chapter came as late as it did! Not only has writer's block for this fic been a complete bitch for me, but with all of the shit that's currently been going on in the US (the election, rapidly rising Covid cases, the ELECTION, especially as someone who lives in a swing state with a lot of electoral votes) I've been on the edge of my seat all week waiting for election results and felt as if any of my writing that came out as a product of this time wouldn't be as good as it could've been. So, after taking it easy, I've finally completed chapter nine for you guys and made a product that I felt like came out pretty okay! I'm still a little nervous about what you guys are gonna think of this chapter, because we're now entering the angst part of my fic and I cannot write angst for the LIFE of me, but I hope I managed to write it well and give it justice that it deserves.

With that all said, thanks so much for all of the kudos, comments, and overall just astounding feedback this fic has received! I hoped everyone had a good week and (very socially distanced) Halloween! And of course, special shout out to @auxctor for both being my beta on all of these past chapters and for agreeing to co-write an upcoming DPS fic with me! (I ain't gonna give away too much, but I WILL say that it's a roadtrip AU that takes place in the 80s and has a ton of crack in it).

I hope you all enjoy the chapter! :)

Never in a million years would Knox have thought a call from his sister would trigger a catastrophic argument between him and Charlie.

It was a completely innocuous evening nearing the middle of November, and at this point, all Knox wanted to do was get his fucking essay done so he could *sleep* , dammit.

But of course, the fates didn't want that, because the second Charlie got done changing out of his soccer uniform he came bursting through his bedroom door like a messy-haired hurricane, throwing himself on Knox's bed unceremoniously so the two of them were laying right next to each other.

His boisterous entrance was a given, Charlie never went about doing *anything* quietly, and Knox wouldn't have been too annoyed if after Charlie's arrival he would've scrolled through social media on his phone. Or take a nap. *Anything* , really.

But he didn't.

Instead, he began poking at Knox's side every five seconds on the *dot* , and Knox swears he's going to absolutely *murder him* .

"You poke me one more time, I'm going to rip your fucking finger off." he threatens darkly after about five minutes, finally reaching his wit's end.

"You wouldn't dare, I need these bad boys," Charlie smirks, wiggling his fingers suggestively.

"For *what?"* Knox demands, his face burning. "Tell me, I would *love* to know."

Charlie opens his mouth, and Knox never finds out exactly what the hell he was getting at because it was at that moment his phone starts ringing.

"For poking me in the side for fucking three hours while I'm trying to write an essay about Pearl Harbor, *you* can get up and get the phone for me."

"I wasn't poking you for *three hours* ," Charlie laughs, but he still gets up off the bed to walk across the room and grab Knox's phone for him.

He squints down at the caller ID, his eyebrows furrowing.

"Who-"

"Your sister," Charlie answers, throwing Knox's phone across the room towards him.

Knox fumbles with the phone, barely managing to catch it, and he can't help but feel a little bit surprised as he goes to answer the call.

He and his sister were on good terms with one another, but they weren't close enough to the point where they texted each other every day. It was even rarer for the two of them to *call* one another, so he instantly was beginning to feel suspicious.

"Hello?" Knox says upon answering the phone, and he feels like his suspicious tone seeps into his voice.

"You never told me you had a boyfriend," his sister says almost immediately, and how accusatory she sounds makes him snort.

Then, he fully registers exactly *what* his sister was saying, because he bursts out laughing.

"I don't have a boyfriend," he laughs, cracking his leg. "I fucking *wish* I do, but no. I don't have one."

"Oh *really?"* she practically sings, and the smugness makes Knox's heart stop. "Because why is it that while I was looking through my stories I came across a selfie of my brother and his roommate practically *laying on top of each other* ?"

Oh, fuck.

Fuck fuck *fuck* . He hates that he knows *exactly* which photo she was referring to.

At some point yesterday evening while the two of them were watching the newest *Mandalorian* episode on Disney Plus, Charlie managed to pick Knox's phone out of the back pocket of his jeans when he hadn't been paying attention like some sort of street-con and took an outlandish selfie of the two of them while Knox was trying to grab his cellphone back.

The photo was blurry, and the two of them were both laughing in the photo, Charlie was laying over his lap trying to escape Knox's grabbing hands.

Charlie captioned it something like 'You know what time it is' with a smirking emoji and a few Mandalorian stickers, and in his slap-happy daze Charlie thought the post was so fucking funny he not only posted it on Knox's story, but he went and posted it on his own story as well.

When Knox woke up this morning and saw the photo he no longer thought it was as funny as he had the night prior, but he had grown ridiculously attached to the photo, so he left it up on his story.

Clearly, that was a decision that was quickly coming to bite him in the fucking ass.

“Becca, I can explain-”

“You two laying on top of each other? Well, this should be interesting.”

“I- Rebeca, *we’re not dating!”* Knox hisses, and the aggressiveness in his voice makes Charlie’s eyebrows raise in questioning. “He was trying to take my phone away from me, really, I-”

“Well, dating or not, I told mom you guys were and she wants you to bring him home for the holidays so we can meet him, even if she’s really hurt you didn’t tell any of us you were dating someone.”

And just when Knox couldn’t imagine this conversation getting worse, his sister goes and hits him with this shit.

Jesus fucking *Christ* , Knox feels as if his *soul just left his fucking body.*

“Rebecca, tell me you *didn’t* .”

“I did,” Rebecca says, beginning to cackle madly. “Love you, bro!”

And, with those final words of mockery, she hangs up the phone.

Knox quickly turns on Charlie, who is staring at him with a confused expression on his face.

“So, that was my sister,” Knox begins, trying his hardest to remain cool and *not* get up and strangle Charlie at the same time.

“Yeah, I got that part,” Charlie scoffs, rolling his eyes. “ *What* did she call you about?”

“She called me to say that she thinks we’re dating.”

He was met with silence for a couple seconds.

“Oh. . . . um, wow,” Charlie says, sounding completely gobsmacked. “Okay.”

“She told my *parents* we were dating,” Knox goes on, ripping off the bandaid. “My mother wants me to bring you home for *Christmas* .”

Charlie opens and closes his mouth a few times, clearly at a loss for

words, and Knox totally would've been giving Charlie shit for it if he isn't so fucking *stressed* right now.

"Well- *fuck* ," he says. A smirk quickly comes onto his face and Knox is almost positive Charlie thought he was being *reassuring* right now. "I- we could go back to your families for Christmas. I mean, we've got a lot of practice at this fake-dating thing over the past few months, what harm would one Christmas break do us?"

"Charlie, this isn't some college party or soccer game where we have to pretend to date in front of our peers for a few hours," Knox says, getting more and more frustrated and stressed out by the second. "Fucking hell, Charlie, this is my *family* we're talking about. Do you seriously think we can play this charade off in front of our *families?"*

"What even makes you think my family knows about it?" Charlie laughs, not taking Knox's frustration seriously. "Like I said, it's one holiday. We got this in the *bag* ."

"Well, if my *sister* thinks we're dating and went and told my parents about it, I'm pretty sure-"

As if by some sort of unsaid, universal cue, Charlie's phone begins ringing on the counter.

Neither of them have to glance at the caller ID to know that it's Charlie's dad on the other end of the line, and the two of them take a few seconds to stare at Charlie's phone as 'Bohemian WAPsody' blares in the silent room.

Knox lets out a sigh. "The longer you let it ring, the more pissed he's gonna be," he tells him.

He doesn't know exactly what kind of person Charlie's father is, as he's never met Charlie's family in person before and has only heard snippets about how he's a part of 'the worst father in the history of fathers club' with Neil's dear old dad, Thomas. So he can only take a good guess that his father wasn't going to be pleased upon Charlie picking up the phone.

Charlie jerks his head with what Knox assumes is supposed to be a nod before crossing the room and picking up his phone, clearing his throat before answering the call.

"Yes, father?"

“I just spoke with Bradley on the phone.”

Even though he wasn’t on speaker, Knox could still hear Charlie’s father’s voice on the other end of the line, so cold and so methodical and a complete juxtaposition to how Knox’s parents spoke with him that it chills him to the bone.

“And?” Charlie prompts wearily.

The rest of what Charlie’s father is saying Knox cannot distinguish, as Charlie but the longer his father rants on, the whiter Charlie’s face becomes until he eventually spins around on his heels and slowly makes his way out of Knox’s room, closing the door shut behind him as he goes.

Knox has no idea how long he’s sitting there waiting for Charlie to come back in. It could’ve been fifteen minutes, or maybe it was a few hours, and just when Knox is about to throw caution to the wind and go outside to check up on Charlie he comes back into the room, practically shaking as he does so.

The sight makes Knox abruptly get up from his chair.

“So?” he asks immediately, not beating around the bush. “Is everything okay?”

Charlie swallows. He opens and closes his mouth a few times, in a way that dispositions his typically charming, self-confident and *not* of the boisterous, adventure-seeking free-spirit he has come to know, and Knox doesn’t like where this conversation is heading. He doesn’t like it one *fucking bit.*

“He-he wants you to come back with me for Thanksgiving break,” Charlie says. “Y’know, ‘meet the family’ and all that other shit.”

Knox feels his shoulders relax, and offers up a reassuring smile.

“That’s *good* , isn’t it?” he asks. “If they want to meet me, I can assume you’re not in trouble, then?”

To Knox’s surprise, Charlie *laughs* at that, the sound coming out cold and sarcastic.

“That’s hilarious, Knoxious, really,” Charlie scoffs, practically spitting out the teasing nickname and turning it into something sour. “You’re a real gem of comedy today, aren’t you?”

“I-” Knox fumbles, at a loss for words. He’s only used to seeing Charlie act like this with Cameron, but even then it came from a place of friendship and playful bickering. *Never* has Knox seen Charlie so upset before. “I don’t what you’re- what is so bad about me coming home with you for Thanksgiving?”

“What’s so bad?” Charlie lets out a snort. “They’re homophobic, Knox. They *hate* that I’m bi. They constantly disregard my sexuality, and every time I bring it up they act like I’m some sort of *disgrace* ,” he pauses for a moment to let out a fierce breath. “They’re only having me bring you back with me to make an example out of me in front of my entire family. I *know* it.”

The words make Knox’s heartache.

“You can’t be sure that’s the reason,” he says gently. “Maybe they had a change of heart and want to try to be more accepting? I mean, they’re your parents. They *love* you, Charlie, even if it doesn’t seem like it, they wouldn’t-”

“You don’t know my parents, Knox,” Charlie seethes. “Quit *acting* like you do.”

“I’m not saying this because *I know you’re parents better than you do* ,” Knox repeats, trying his very hardest to remain level-headed and not lose his cool. “I’m saying this because they’re your family and they *love* you, I *know* they do.”

Knox aims for the words to be reassuring, to make Charlie feel better. However, it’s clear that they end up having the opposite effect, as the longer Knox talks, the more calculated Charlie’s breathing becomes and he noticeably clenches his jaw.

Against his own accord, in an attempt to fill the silence and to get Charlie to respond, Knox keeps fucking talking, even though he knows the words aren’t doing any good at this point.

“Just- help me understand. Let me help you, *please* , ” Knox knows he’s babbling at this point, but he has long since passed the point of caring. “I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong, I-”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Knox, with how much of a nagging dick you are, no wonder why Chris broke up with you!” Charlie explodes, and-

Knox completely clams up. The words are worse than a slap in the face ever could be, taking all of Knox’s insecurities he’s been trying to

push to the deepest part of his brain for months and making them come to the surface like a roaring tsunami.

Working completely on muscle memory, he grabs his car keys off the counter and storms out of the room silently, not even daring himself to speak. If he did he knew he was going to end up blurting out something he was only going to regret, and him letting his own anger and frustration get the best of him wouldn't help better the situation in any way, shape, or form.

Charlie's hot on his heel, and only stops when he reaches the threshold of the living room, watching Knox as he makes quick work of putting on his boots and his jacket.

"Knox, what are you-"

"I'm leaving," he grits out, his voice shaking. "Isn't that what you *wanted* me to do, with how much of a nagging dick I am? I'm giving you the space you want."

Charlie takes a step forward. A lot of the anger on his face has dissipated, replaced with a deep sort of regret, and the expression makes Knox's heart clench just as much as it fills him with frustration.

"Knox, I-" he begins, but Knox doesn't get to hear the tail end of Charlie's reply because he heads out the door, making a point to slam it behind him as he leaves.

A part of Knox wants Charlie to come running after him, to try stopping him in the middle of the hall and profess a deeply emotional apology. But the other part of him- the one that ends up winning out- just wants to put as much distance between them as possible.

As he storms by Nolan's apartment, the devil himself pokes his head out, most likely hearing the argument going on next door and finally going to report their shit to the tenant.

Seeing Nolan makes Knox completely lose it, and before Nolan can even open his mouth to say some sort of snarky, 'I'm old and therefore way more superior than everyone else' comment, Knox cuts him off.

"Oh, fuck off, would you?!" he shouts. "Go back to reading your flat-earth pamphlets and jerking off alone in the dark!"

Nolan's eyes widen at Knox's words before anger quickly overcomes his features. He takes a step out of his door, revealing that he's in a

ratty-looking bathrobe that looks so old Knox is shocked there aren't *cobwebs* on it.

In any other situation, Knox would've been completely scared shitless and ran back to the safety of his apartment for even *saying* something like this to Nolan- *especially* to his face and not through the security of the wall- but he's far too pissed off at this point to even give a damn.

"Now," Nolan begins angrily, jabbing an angry finger at Knox. "Don't think I'm not going to report this to the-"

Knox takes a challenging step towards Nolan, ready to dish what Nolan had to give right fucking back to him.

"Do it!" he screams- *screams* - and fuck, so much for him keeping his mouth closed and not letting his anger get to him. "I fucking dare you you decrepit, Mitch McConnell knock-off! If you go down there and report Charlie and I to the tenant, I'll go and report you to the local police department for fucking tax evasion!"

Knox's words make Nolan's eyes grow even *wider* , and he slowly backs into his apartment before slamming the door in Knox's face.

Good.

Practically shaking, Knox heads down the stairs and out the apartment complex towards his car. With trembling fingers, he starts up his car, and without even having a destination in mind, he drives off.

Knox is about fifteen minutes away from his apartment in the parking lot of a Wendy's when his phone starts ringing.

He's almost expecting it to be Charlie, and even though Knox wasn't exactly in the mood to talk to him, he still sets his frosty he'd been passive-aggressively eating for the past three minutes in the cup holder and reaches out for his phone anyway, only to realize it wasn't even Charlie at all who was trying to call him. It was *Neil.*

Knox rushes to answer the phone.

"Hey!" Knox greets a little too enthusiastically, his voice muffled due to the mouthful of chocolate ice cream he was eating. "Is everything okay?"

"I should be asking you the same thing," Neil replies simply, not

sounding in the tiniest bit like he's upset over anything. "Charlie told me you guys got in a fight."

The words make Knox wants to bang his head off the steering wheel, and he cannot help the agitation he was starting to feel, because-

"Charlie is seriously giving you *tabs* on me *?"* Knox demands, incredulous. "Even though he was the person who yelled at me to leave him alone and to quit nagging him about his personal life? Are you fucking *serious* right now?"

Stunned silence comes through from the other end of the line and Knox instantly catches the mistake he's made.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he quickly attempts to amend, scrubbing at his eyes helplessly. "I shouldn't be blowing up on you for all of this, it's not fair to you at all."

"It's not," Neil agrees, and with how empathetic and understanding he sounds, it only makes Knox feel like even *more* of a dick. "But it's also not fair for Charlie to completely shut you out like that."

Knox's jaw drops.

"You-you're on *my side* ?"

"I wouldn't necessarily call it 'picking sides' per se," Neil says. "Charlie has a serious problem opening up to people about his issues. *Especially* when it comes to his family. I've known him since we were eleven and it took him until we were almost *sixteen* before he finally began opening up to me about what's been going in his personal life."

The words make Knox's body run cold.

"Have they ever-"

"Not physically, no," Neil says, knowing exactly where Knox's train of thought was heading. "But sometimes words hurt way more than physical abuse ever could."

Knox lets out a shuddering breath, cursing as he presses his head against the headrest. "How long has his family been treating him like this for?"

Neil's silent for a few seconds and Knox is almost scared Neil hung up on him.

Then he replies.

“Since as long as I’ve known him, probably for longer.”

And Knox almost wishes Neil would’ve just hung up.

“Fuck, Neil, I-”

“I’m not going to give you all the details about Charlie’s life,” Neil continues, sounding about as emotionally exhausted as Knox is feeling. “It’s his decision on whether or not to tell you about what’s happening with his parents and I’m almost positive he hasn’t even told *me* everything. But, since you’re most likely going to be meeting these people over Thanksgiving break, I guess I’m just calling to give you a little heads up about the situation you’re about to get yourself into, especially since I know how much you care for him.”

Knox nods his head, and after doing so he feels like a complete idiot because he realizes Neil can’t *fucking see him* .

“Sure,” he confirms aloud. “I- Thanks, Neil. Seriously.”

Neil heaves a deep sigh, then.

“His parents fucked him up a lot,” he starts, straight to the point. “A lot more than he’s willing to admit. He doesn’t like talking about it a good portion of the time; he just doesn’t handle feelings well under *any* circumstance, but particularly when it has to do with his family and the things that bother him most. Talking about his family means vulnerability. And Charlie struggles with vulnerability.”

Knox already knew Charlie was the type of person not to talk about his emotions, ready to come back with a sarcastic quip instead of giving a detailed exposition about his life. But hearing the explanation as to *why* is making his heart break in ways he didn’t even think were possible before.

“What I’m I even supposed to do, then?” he manages to ask. “How can I even help him out when I don’t know what I need to help him out with to begin with?”

At this point, he’s uncertain about whether or not he wants to hear Neil’s answer. But whether he wants to hear it or not, Neil answers his question anyway.

“You need to give him space. And time. The harder you try to push

him into opening up, the more resistant he'll become to it."

Knox's jaw drops at the silent accusation.

"I wasn't trying to-"

"I know you weren't trying to, but that's how Charlie sees it," Neil explains, soft but unwavering. "He spends a lot of energy trying to separate himself and all of us from that part of his life, and those two parts mixing scares the fucking hell out of him. But when you want him to talk about it; it's mixing his past and his trauma and all this unspoken shit he's been through with you, and he doesn't want that."

"I'm at a loss right now," Knox admits. Anxious for something to do, he begins picking at the denim of his jeans. "What are you expecting me to do?"

"You just need to be patient with him. Let him take his time; when he tells you to back off, back off. But just because you can't always help, doesn't mean you can't be there for him, yeah?"

Knox nods his head again.

"Yeah, but should I *really* be taking advice from the person who freshman year puked at open mic after only having one shot?" Knox teases weakly, the seriousness of the conversation and who it was retaining to almost being too much for him to handle.

Neil laughs, and Knox can practically picture him rolling his eyes on the other end of the line. "That was because Charlie slipped ipecac syrup in my drink and you *know* it."

Knox manages a slight smile.

"Just- head back to the apartment. Make amends. Call me and let me know if everything goes well."

"I can't make any promises I won't fuck things up further, but-"

"You won't fuck it up, Knox. I know you won't." Neil says, and before Knox could reply further, Neil disconnects the call.

Head back to the apartment. Make amends. Call me and let me know if everything goes well .

Neil sounded so sure of Knox, so confident in his ability to get Charlie to open up to him that it was beginning to make Knox feel the tiniest

bit of confidence, and it turns out that was all the encouragement he needed to start up his car and head back to his apartment.

Charlie's waiting on the steps of the apartment building when Knox returns.

He's sitting there with his arms wrapped around his bent legs and despite it being only thirty degrees out, he still has on the same white short-sleeve he had been wearing in the apartment earlier. His eyes are bloodshot and the smell of weed in the air is so strong that it's making Knox's mind reel, and Knox immediately gets his answer as to why when he catches sight of the blunt dangling limply between Charlie's fingertips.

Charlie doesn't say anything as Knox walks towards him, choosing to keep staring up at Knox silently with an out-of-focus expression on his face, lost in whatever void the weed he's been smoking put him into.

Knox frantically rushes through his brain something to say, *anything* , but his mind is unhelpfully blank.

It turns out he doesn't have to think of anything because Charlie is the one who ends up speaking first.

"Sorry for shouting earlier," he mumbles. The words coming out sluggish and delayed, a side-effect of the weed, and there's a far-away sounding quality to his voice. "I can be a real piece of shit, sometimes."

"You're okay," Knox replies immediately, taking a few more steps forward. "You're-"

"No, I'm not," Charlie whispers. He finally glances up at Knox, and the first thing Knox notices is how wide his pupils are dilated. "I shouldn't have snapped like that, I should've tried explaining everything better to you."

"And I should've given you the space you needed until you were ready to open up about it. But Charlie-" Knox cuts himself off to let out a deep breath, and hates the way it makes Charlie's shoulders tense. "We live together. I just-I'm-"
Hurt? Betrayed someone who I would trust with my entire life and soul doesn't feel comfortable with me?

A million possible replies conjure in his mind for how he could

respond, and each one makes him anxious because he knows saying the wrong thing can land them back to square one and begin a whole other argument.

“You can trust me with this stuff, is what I’m trying to say,” is what he settles on.

Charlie doesn’t reply automatically, favoring taking a deep hit. He puffs out the smoke, mingling with his breath in the chilly autumn air in a tantalizing dance.

“I know,” Charlie mumbles eventually. “I *know* that, okay? It’s just- my family. . . they’re not the greatest people, okay? There’s a reason I hate talking about them with anyone or haven’t invited any of you guys back to my house during summer break.”

He pauses, and Knox allows him all the time he needs to find the right words.

“ *I* don’t even want to go back to see them. So I certainly don’t want you to have to come back with me or- feel like you’re morally obligated to do this or whatever.”

“Charlie, you’re not forcing me to do anything. I *want* to do this,” Knox stresses gently. “Besides, if they’re this shitty there ain’t no way in hell I’m letting my boyfriend go back to deal with them alone now am I?”

Knox flashes Charlie a goofy smile in an attempt to lighten the mood, the one he often gave Chris whenever he would try cheering her up when she was having a bad day. It quickly proves to be effective, as Charlie bends his head down and is laughing, and-

Laughing was a good sign. Laughing was *progress* .

“I just- are you sure?” Charlie asks, his laughter dying down. “This isn’t going to be easy. My family’s not Chris’.”

“I’m not going to change my mind, we’re in this shit together,” Knox promises firmly. He reaches out to teasingly nudge Charlie with the bag of Wendy’s he brought back for him. “Now come on. Let’s get you inside before you get frostbite and Nolan calls the tenant on us, yeah? No matter how much we smoke pot, it’s still illegal to smoke recreationally in the state of New York.”

“Easy for you to say. I went through the efforts to get a medical

marijuana license and *you* didn't," Charlie retorts petulantly, but he still clumsily pushes himself off the ground to follow Knox into the building. He sways a little bit on his feet and if Knox didn't hurriedly reach out to catch him, Charlie would've fallen face-first into the door.

The entire journey guiding a high off his ass Charlie back to their apartment was quickly proving itself to be an endeavor, one that caused Charlie to almost fall down the steps and stumble around helplessly like a toddler taking their first steps.

By the time the two of them arrive outside of their door, Knox is laughing so hard tears are streaming down his face.

He doesn't even get the apartment door opened all the way before Charlie is shoving past him to get inside, grabbing the Wendy's bag out of his hands and making a beeline straight for the couch.

Knox watches him go, and he can't help but let out a relieved sigh as he watches Charlie eagerly open the greasy fast food bag, all of the tension giving way in his body as he does so.

They were going to be okay , he thinks to himself. *They had to be.*

Then, Charlie looks over his shoulder at Knox and asks,

"Am I just high off my ass, or did I seriously hear you call Nolan a knock-off Mitch McConnell?"

They were definitely going to be okay.

Knox wakes up at 7:45 the following morning.

He doesn't end up having to work today since one of his coworkers asked to take his shift- *thank God* - but he wakes up incredibly exhausted, as if he hasn't gotten much sleep.

He blearily makes his way out of his bed and towards the kitchen to brew a cup of coffee, trying his hardest to push all thoughts of yesterday out of his head as he gears himself up to take an exam for his online class about LGBT history in the US, but stops short when he sees Charlie sitting at the kitchen table.

He's eating Trix out of a coffee mug like doing so wasn't committing an act of treason against cereal bowls everywhere, and is peering over his bulky textbooks with a sort of rapt attention that was rare to see

on him. The scene made Knox's heart warm. Academically concentrated Charlie Dalton was one of Knox's favorite Charlie Dalton's.

"Close your mouth, Knoxious," Charlie chides, not even taking his eyes off his textbooks for a second. "You'll catch flies."

"Not my fault I'm a little spooked to see you up before noon on a Saturday."

Knox pokes at Charlie's side as he makes his way to the cupboard to grab out his favorite coffee mug, and Charlie lets out a little laugh that makes Knox feel both accomplished and smitten at the same time.

"It's not like I *want* to be up this early," Charlie quickly defends, and the childish whine his voice takes on makes Knox smile widely as he brews his coffee. "I have an essay that's due at 11:59 tonight and I don't fucking trust the shady Charter Bus wifi no matter *how* much Hopkins sings his praises about it."

The smile that was spreading across Knox's face immediately falls at the words, and he hates the way his heart sinks.

The away games. Fuck, how could he *forget* ?

He was so focused on their argument yesterday evening, about how stressed he was that he somehow managed to fuck up his friendship with Charlie, that he didn't realize it was going to be Charlie's last night in town until *Wednesday* , as Columbia's varsity soccer team had to play a series of grueling games against private upstate colleges and the other Ivy Leagues they haven't played against yet.

"Oh." Knox provides simply, not really sure how to respond.

"Yeah," Charlie replies, the syllable hardly coming out above a whisper. "Oh."

The two of them fell into a silence after that, which Knox would've considered a comfortable one if it hadn't been for the strange tension he noticed was beginning to mount between them since yesterday evening. Despite the two of them attempting to act as if everything was fine and nothing off-putting happened between them, there were moments like this when Knox was faced head-on with the fact that *yes* , everything that happened yesterday *did in fact happen* , that yesterday made them cross some sort of threshold they weren't able to turn around from.

As always, Charlie is the one who is confident enough to break the tension.

“We should change our relationship status on Facebook.”

Knox’s coffee cup almost slips through his fingers. Out of all the things he was expecting Charlie to say, that had to have been the *last* thing that crossed his mind.

“ *What?* ”

“Just, hear me out,” Charlie rushes when catching sight of the look on Knox’s face. “The only people we really have on Facebook are our families, right? Wouldn’t they find it a little *odd* if we went to each other's houses for the holiday’s and it said on Facebook that we were both single?”

“I mean, yeah, but-” Knox flounders a second. “You do know this is going to ruin any chance of you having hookups with *anyone* , right?”

He hates that he even has to *ask* this question; Charlie hooking up with anyone was the absolute *last* thing Knox wanted to think about or to have happen, but it was still such a blatantly *apparent* part of Charlie’s life that he couldn’t just completely ignore it because he had a crush.

“Haven’t had any hookups in a while,” Charlie says with an awkward laugh, typing something out on his phone. “I think I’m going to be okay.”

Knox’s phone lights up with a notification, but he’s too busy feeling like the wind has been knocked out of him to check it right away. Because what Charlie was saying was *true* , and it meant he might actually have a *chance* .

An insubordinate amount of time later Knox does check his phone, only to see a Facebook notification from Charlie that’s asking if he wanted to confirm a relationship status change. And-

“I- you’re actually being *serious?”*

“As a goddamn heart attack.”

Knox glances down at his phone again, then back up at Charlie, who has his chin in his hand and is staring up at Knox with an almost expectant look on his face.

“I’m going to end up regretting this, aren’t I?”

“Just suck it up and click fucking accept already, dammit.”

The impatience in Charlie’s tone causes Knox to laugh a little, and he can’t help but feel as if he was making some sort of pact with the devil as he shakily unlocks his phone to press the ‘accept request’ button. He stares down at his phone, eyeing the way the buffering circle pops up in the center of the screen, before it gives way to the new post.

It’s right at the top of his Facebook timeline, and seeing it only just solidifies the fact that Knox was *actually about to go through with this.*

At this point, there was no turning back. No last-minute scramble to call this whole thing off, because now with the post out there for the whole world to see, it was only a matter of time before people saw it and began *commenting* on it, and Knox hates that no matter how stressed he feels as he anxiously closes his phone, he also just wishes this entire thing was for real.

It Won't Be Long

Chapter Summary

In which the poets play Cards Against Humanity, too many weed brownies are eaten, and Knox is going through separation anxiety while Charlie is away at his soccer tournament.

Chapter Notes

Hey!

Originally when uploading this chapter, I absolutely had NO intentions of uploading it on Thanksgiving day morning, however that is just the way the cookie crumbles, lmao. I also was supposed to upload this last week as a cute little fluff filler between the last chapter and what is going to be what I like to call The Thanksgiving Shit Show™, but then I got out of hand with the fluff and now you have an over 9k fluff fest. So blame me getting depressed over angst on that one.

Thanks to everyone who reads this fic! You guys are seriously the best, and truly are the greatest motivators out there, I swear. And also- as always- a thank you to @auxctor for beta-ing this fic and for putting up with me spamming them with messages saying 'i think I might get this chapter done today' only for me to be completely off and to not end up even finishing said chapter for another few days. The amount of times I've gotten their hopes up just to have them wait is ASTOUNDING, lmaooo.

I hope you all enjoy this chapter, and have a very safe and happy Thanksgiving weekend!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At this point, Knox should fucking know by now to never listen to *anything* Charlie wants him to go along with, no matter how big of a crush he has on him.

The Facebook post turns out to be just as shitty of an idea as Knox expected it to be. He wasn't able to check his phone right away due to the fact he was in the middle of a two-hour exam when all the notifications began flooding in, but when he finally does garner the courage to check his phone he sees that the post is his most liked one *ever*, proving his silent theory that you only got a fuck ton of likes

on a social media post whenever you were in a relationship with someone.

Most of the comments were from members of his family wishing him heartfelt congratulations about the new relationship, while others came from friends he went to high school with or shared a semester-long class with giving their obligatory support. Chris had liked the post, which made something uncomfortable and forlorn creep back up into his throat, and Hopkins commented 'about damn time, fuckers' with a winky face. To his chagrin, his sister simply just commented 'lmao,' which Knox replied to with a string of middle finger emojis before he separately made another comment thanking everyone for the kind words.

None of Charlie's family members left any comments on it, which is something Knox couldn't tell made Charlie relieved or anxious, but something that clearly made the both of them feel odd was the fact that none of the poets had interacted with the post or messaged them asking for any sort of clarification.

But it didn't end up being the amount of likes or heartfelt comments or the complete fucking radio silence from his best friends that made him regret his decision to make the post.

Oh, no. It was the call from his mother immediately after she had seen the post that made him want to get ejected into interstellar space.

Knox's mother was the person that he considered to be his biggest support system in life; she had been the first person he came out as bisexual to, she pushed him to apply for Columbia despite Yale being within walking distance of their home, and she had sent him a package of homemade chocolate chip cookies in the mail when she found out about Chris breaking up with him.

To put it simply, Mary Overstreet was one of the main reasons Knox even tried half as hard at anything in life, so when he saw that she was calling him, he was excited to talk to her.

"KNOX IRWIN OVERSTREET, ARE YOU TRYING TO PULL THE WOOL OVER YOUR POOR MOTHERS EYES?!" is what his mother shrieks at him the second he answers, and her voice is so loud it makes Knox fumble with the grip he has on his phone.

Charlie- who was still sitting at the kitchen table trying to pick away at his essay- glances up from his laptop with such a comically-wide-eyed look that it would've made Knox laugh if he wasn't terrified for

his fucking life.

"Ma," Knox squeaks out with faux casualness, shifting weight on his feet sheepishly as he leans up against the hallway wall. "How- how's it going?"

“HOW DO YOU THINK?! ” is the scream he gets in response, and if Knox squints, he swears all the glass in the apartment is shaking. She takes a few impatient breaths, as if she’s trying to calm her temper, before continuing. “I have to find out you are dating someone through your *sister* , and before you even think about giving me a call about it, you make a *Facebook post about it.* ”

“Ma, I-”

“Ma *what?*” she demands sharply, and Knox clamps his mouth shut instantly. “You can *talk* to me, Knox. I’m your mother, for fucking Christ’s sake! I-”

She continues ranting, but what she is saying becomes an insistently loud background noise when Knox hears a loud snicker break out.

He snaps his gaze over to where Charlie is staring at him at the kitchen table. His lips are pressed in a thin line but they’re quivering in an obvious attempt to conceal his laughter.

‘Oh, don’t even fucking *start*' Knox mouths at him, jabbing a finger angrily at him in warning. But doing this causes Charlie’s resolve to crack entirely and he bursts out into a loud fit of pealing laughter.

“-do you understand?”

His mother ends her rant with a way softer tone, but the incredulity that has plagued her voice for the entire conversation is still remaining.

Shit.

“Yeah, I do,” Knox says slowly, to play it safe, and tries his hardest to shut Charlie’s laughter out of his head as it was making him unable to concentrate. Then, he comes to realize something, and knowing he had to rip off the bandaid sooner than later, says, “Would now be a bad time to tell you that I’m going to Charlie’s for Thanksgiving?” and just like that, she is going off on another rant about how Knox ‘doesn’t bother letting her know things in advance.’

She practically screams herself hoarse before hanging up with an affectionate ‘I love you,’ that leaves Charlie and Knox staring at each other, wide eyes and jaws agape.

“Your mom has got to be the most amazing but most terrifying woman I’ve ever heard in my entire life,” Charlie says, and the complete awe in his voice makes Knox chuckle a little bit.

“Tell me about it,” he agrees. Feeling like he should be saying more, he asks, “What time do you leave for the bus station?”

“Five,” Charlie answers, the laughter dying down from his voice a little bit. “Hopkins said he could come pick me up at four-thirty and that we were going to carpool with Sticks.”

Knox nods his head a tiny bit, feeling his stomach sink a little bit.

Then, he gets an idea.

“I could just drive you down there?” he suggests, his heart pounding in his ears as he says the words. “I gotta head out anyway to pick up groceries, it wouldn’t be too far out of the way.”

Charlie blinks up at him a few times, as if he’s not entirely sure Knox is being for real right now.

“You sure?” he asks, cocking his head a little bit as he rests his chin in his palm.

Knox nods his head.

“Yeah, tell Hopkins not to worry.”

Charlie stares at Knox a few more moments before glancing down at the table.

“Okay, cool.”

“Cool,” Knox echoes.

Charlie sits there, and Knox thinks the conversation is done and over with until a wide smile suddenly breaks out on his face.

“Since we got a few hours to kill, do you want to watch the newest episodes of *The Mandalorian* that we missed?”

Knox doesn’t even have to think twice.

“Yeah, absolutely.”

They end up migrating to the couch a few minutes later, both of them carrying heaping bowls of Mac and Cheese Knox made from one of the boxes he found in the back of the cupboard. The first episode is action-packed from start to finish, and while all Charlie can rant about is how *The Mandalorian* is the single greatest thing to happen to the Star Wars franchise since the original trilogy, all Knox really had an interest in was what Baby Yoda is doing for most of the episode.

Around halfway through the second episode of the season, Knox rests his head against the arm of the couch, which he immediately comes to regret as not even a few minutes after doing so he passes out, completely spent from the exam he took.

Distantly, he registers Charlie getting up from the couch next to him at some point and coming back to drape a blanket over him, a mirror image of what Knox did for him a few weeks prior.

The scent of Charlie’s cologne and the faint smell of weed come off the blanket, so Knox knows Charlie got it from his room, but there’s something about the combination he finds comfort in, and like a moth drawn to a flame he brings the blanket in closer to himself, smiling as the warmth envelopes his body.

He’s not entirely certain if he imagines the feeling or if he’s too far gone in his sleep-ridden daze, but he swears he feels the sensation of lips brushing against his temple, and although his smile grows a little wider at the mere prospect, he dozes right back off.

Knox wakes up a few hours later to Charlie flicking him in the ear repeatedly.

If he would’ve done it once, Knox might’ve thought it was endearing, Charlie’s teasing way of waking him up. *Maybe* he would’ve even thought it was a little sweet.

But then Charlie keeps doing it, and Knox feels like he’s in one of the nine circles of hell.

“Fucking *knock it off*,” he croaks sleepily, blindly swatting at the offending finger in an attempt to make it stop.

Charlie’s loud laughter rings in his ear as he retracts his hand away, but not before flicking Knox’s ear a final time.

“Stooop,” Knox groans, dragging out the ‘o’, which does nothing but make Charlie laugh again. He scrapes one of the palms of his hands over his eyes. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Three fifty.”

Knox’s eyes automatically snap open at the words, and he moves himself into a sitting position so fast it makes him feel lightheaded.

He had overslept. Son of a *bitch*.

“Shit,” he curses. “Charlie, I’m so sorry, I-”

“It’s fine, Knoxious, don’t worry about it,” Charlie cuts him off. He appears way more casual than Knox feels, his backpack slung over his shoulders and both of his duffle bags full of soccer gear on the coffee table. He almost looks amused, and Knox has no fucking clue why. “I could still call Hopkins to come and pick me up still, if you wanted. You still seem fucking exhausted.” He pauses for a second, and then continues talking when Knox doesn’t reply right away. “Or I could drive myself in my car that I never seem to use. Whatever’s more convenient.”

Knox shakes his head in protest, despite letting out a giant yawn that contradicts the point he's trying to push.

“No, I can still do it."

Knox blinks his eyes a few times as he tries to reorient himself, and when he does so he notices something that makes him do a double-take.

“Are you wearing my sweatshirt?”

At a first glance, it would’ve looked like Charlie was just wearing his own sweatshirt, since they both own the same one. But the sleeves on the one he was currently wearing were a bit baggier than his sweatshirt normally was, and the sweatshirt came all the way down to the base of his thighs instead of at his hips like the other one did. It looked good on him; *really* fucking good.

“Uh, yeah,” Charlie says, laughing a little sheepishly as he rolls on the balls of his feet. “My sweatshirt hasn’t been washed yet so I grabbed this one. I could go change, if-”

“Don’t!” Knox insists a little quickly, and Charlie startles a little bit at

how insistent Knox sounds. “I’m not worried about it, it-”

It looks good on you.

“It’s not a big deal,” is what he ends up saying.

Charlie nods his head and goes on to give Knox this look, like he desperately wants to say something but there’s something holding him back. But before Knox can ask him what’s on his mind, Charlie is heading down the hallway towards his room to go grab the last of his things.

Knox heaves himself up off the couch feebly to go help him, which is how he finds himself carrying a duffle bag he cannot for the life of him understand how Charlie can appear so effortlessly carrying. They’re getting ready to head out of the apartment, and in a last-ditch effort to try being charismatic, Knox rushes to open the door for Charlie.

“After you,” he says dramatically, gesturing towards the open door with a sweeping wave of his hand.

Charlie glances at Knox and then the ajar door before letting out a loud snort.

“Such a gentleman, Overstreet,” he notes with mock-seriousness. “Girls and boys alike could only possibly *dream* of having a boyfriend like you.”

Knox flushes at the comment and all Charlie does is laugh and rolls his eyes before obeying Knox’s request and heads out the apartment door, leaving Knox to hopelessly trail after him towards his car.

The drive down to the bus station wasn’t long, as the bus stop everyone was meeting up at was located only a half-hour away from their apartment, and Knox kind of wishes the traffic would stall so that he could spend more time with Charlie.

It doesn’t- much to his disappointment- and when Knox pulls into the parking lot he finds the rest of the varsity soccer team is already there, throwing all of their bags into the underbelly of the bus carelessly and laughing amongst themselves.

Knox and Charlie aren’t even out of the car for a full five seconds before they get swamped, Charlie’s teammates wasting no time to start catcalling and cheering over-exaggeratingly at the two of them, and

while Charlie laughs at all the comments getting thrown their way, quipping back and forth with all the guys with ease, Knox becomes a blushing mess and just stands there, being left to take the brunt of it all as he half-heartedly helps Charlie put his duffle bags underneath the bus.

The teasing only lets up when the soccer coach peeks his head out of one of the windows and hollers at everyone to get a move on. They all look annoyed but listen to the coach, grumbling amongst each other as they make their way up the steps, and Hopkins hollers out a polite farewell over his shoulder to Knox before the door closes behind them, leaving Charlie and Knox alone outside of the bus.

“So,” Knox begins awkwardly, stuffing his hands inside his pants pockets.

“So,” Charlie echoes, his eyes crinkling.

“This is it.”

“It is,” Charlie agrees, and now he’s full-on smirking.

It gives Knox a bad feeling, like he’s the punchline of some joke he isn’t aware he’s a part of.

“What?” he demands.

“Oh, nothing,” Charlie says dismissively, even though the smirk on his face makes it clear that it isn’t just *nothing*. “Just don’t want you missing me too much, Knoxious,” and then Charlie gives Knox this self-assured wink that goes right through his heart.

You're not even on the fucking bus yet and I already miss you.

“I-” Knox starts, although he has no clue how to even fucking *respond* to that sort of comment.

Thankfully, he doesn’t have to.

“Hurry it up, Dalton!” a voice hollers out, making both of them fall silent. “We *will* leave without you if you don’t get on this bus in five minutes.”’

“I’m coming! Just give me a fucking minute, would you?!” Charlie hollers back. He turns back to Knox with an annoyed huff. “Sorry about Coach, he’s extra antsy because Harvard obliterated us last

year."

"You should go," Knox tells Charlie with a teasing shove, even though he wants him to do the exact opposite. "Before he kills you."

"Yes sir," Charlie salutes with a roll of his eyes, and with a dramatically blown kiss, he spins around and all but rushes onto the bus.

The doors close right behind him and Knox turns around and heads towards his car when he hears the bus start-up, trying his hardest not to look back at the Charter bus as it drives off in the opposite direction.

When Knox had gotten home from dropping off Charlie, his original plan wasn't to go and make fucking *pot brownies*. But Charlie's absence had caused such an obnoxious silence to settle in the apartment that it was beginning to cause Knox enormous amounts of discomfort, and before Knox could even think the decision all the way through, he finds himself walking down the hall and into Charlie's room in search of weed, the desire to get completely stoned eating edibles while watching the ridiculously terrible (but he'll never admit it aloud) Beatles movie *Help!* being too promising of an idea to pass up.

Upon opening the bedroom door Knox comes faced with the same, well-organized disaster Charlie's bedroom always is. While Charlie had made his bed impeccably before leaving, there's such a giant pile of dirty clothes at the base of his bed that Knox couldn't distinguish where the clothes ended and the floor began. Papers were scattered all over his desk- college assignments, random pieces of Nolan's mail he had 'forgotten' to return back to his mailbox- and there, on Charlie's nightstand next to his Led Zeppelin vinyls and an empty glass of water that Knox knows for a *fact* he had forgotten to put in the kitchen sink before he left, was a mason jar full of weed. It's one of the four jars Charlie has hidden in random places around his room, so Knox doesn't end up feeling too bad about taking the entire jar. If it comes down to it, he'll just pay him back somehow.

As soon as he begins baking, he immediately comes to regret the decision.

Making pot brownies was a meticulous business. A true art, if Knox does say so himself. But it was fucking difficult, and with the amount of preparation it took to make weed butter, Knox was honestly certain cooking crystal meth would've been a lot less difficult.

He manages to make his way through the steps with a hesitant confidence, and he's in the middle of mixing the cannabis he just put in with the melted butter when he gets a phone call from Cameron.

Cursing under his breath, Knox limply drops the spatula he was using and picks up his phone.

"Yes?" he asks, deciding not to beat around the bush and entertain Cameron.

"Are you busy right now?"

Knox glances forlornly down at the cannabis butter that's beginning to rapidly harden before he replies.

"A little, but not really. What's up?"

"Well, I was studying for an exam for my government class and needed to fill out this resume for a law firm I was trying to intern at this summer and was wondering if you could help?"

Knox isn't all that surprised that he was the first one Cameron was approaching for resume advice, because while Neil takes on the role as the group's unofficial leader, Knox finds himself being the unofficial support system; the glue keeping everyone together so they don't all end up killing each other (and by 'they' he means 'Charlie and Cameron'). He's the one to help Neil run lines when he theatre season is at an all-time high, who is the first to offer shitty input on Todd's essays, participates in off-kilter science experiments with Pitts and Meeks that he was almost certain breaks a countless number of laws, helps Cameron brush up on his history and government knowledge, and Charlie-

Well, it's pretty damn apparent he would go to hell and back if Charlie asked him to at this point. He's so far gone, it's not even funny anymore.

"Yeah, we can meet up. I need to work on my student-teaching applications, anyway."

"That's great!" Cameron says. It's one of the rare moments when Knox can tell Cameron is genuinely excited and relieved and it makes him smile a tiny bit. "Do you want to meet up at Butler Library?"

"Actually, can you come over here, instead?" Knox asks hesitantly, scared the question is going to pop the bubble and change Cameron's

mood completely. “I dropped off Charlie earlier, and I honestly don’t wanna leave the apartment for the rest of the day.”

Knox can’t even see him, but he knows Cameron has that frown on his face; the one that Charlie always says makes him look like a sour-puss. But, fortunately, it turns out Cameron is perfectly okay with the arrangement, and with a promise that he’s going to be over in a half-hour, hangs up the phone.

If Charlie was around to see how excited he was - especially since it was *Cameron* who he was going to be hanging out with- he would be giving him so much shit right now. But Knox couldn’t really find it in himself to care; usually when all the poets made plans to hang out, Knox and Charlie were often the ones going into the city to meet up with everyone as there was way more to do in the city. So knowing one of his friends was going to be coming over to his place was a little bit exciting, even if Charlie would call him the biggest dork in the world for thinking so.

With the newfound sense of energy, Knox manages to put the butter and the fridge and clean up the slight mess he made in the kitchen, and exactly a half-hours passes before he hears a knock at the front door.

Knox always gave Cameron shit on a lot of things, but if there was one thing Knox truly appreciated about him, it was the fact that he was always punctual.

“It’s open!” Knox hollers over his shoulder, and with those words, Cameron comes into the apartment. He’s got a bulky jacket on and two scarves looped around his neck, looking like someone who was out studying Penguins in Antarctica instead of a New Yorker who had to commute in weather that hasn’t even dipped down into the thirties yet. Charlie always blamed Cameron’s intolerance of the cold on the fact he was from Georgia, and that is exactly what Knox is blaming Cameron’s intolerance of the cold on right now.

Cameron takes in his surroundings with an almost proud look on his face, and if he doesn’t notice the way Knox is trying his hardest not to laugh as he over-exaggeratingly stomps snow off of his shoes, either because he’s truly oblivious or because he’s in too good of a mood to say anything.

“I’ve got to say,” he says brightly as he closes the door behind himself. “This place is a lot cleaner than I was expecting it to be.”

And just like that, Knox was painfully reminded exactly *why* he and Charlie never invited Cameron over very often in the first place.

“Even when New York is nearing her coldest months, you still manage to keep your painful honesty intact,” Knox says, though he doesn’t hold much heat behind the words.

Cameron gives a painful eye-roll in response and bends down to take off his converse with such care and precision Knox would’ve thought he was trying to defuse a bomb and *not* like someone who was untying their shoelaces.

After straightening himself, Cameron frowns.

“Wait a second. . . is that *weed* I smell?”

Knox has no idea why the fuck Cameron is even being so accusatory right now; Knox has smoked weed with Cameron on a handful of occasions.

“Why, are you going to report me to the tenant?” Knox asks defensively.

“No,” he responds carefully, taking off his jacket and scarves with the same precision he had his shoes. “I was just warning you to be more careful so someone *doesn't* report you to the tenant. Open a damn window, at least. Out of you and Charlie, I thought you were the one who had all the common sense.”

Relief practically floods through Knox’s entire body.

“I *am* the one who has the common sense,” he says with a roll of his eyes, which earns a laugh from Cameron.

“You really are,” Cameron agrees. He hikes his backpack higher up on his shoulder as he walks into the living room. “Thanks again, for agreeing to read my stuff over.”

“Of course, Cameron,” Knox says, making his way over to the recliner in the living room. “I’m going to try being as much of a help as I can.”

Needless to say, Knox doesn’t end up being much help.

He *was* for about the first hour Cameron was over, as he adamantly read over Cameron’s paper and gave him what minimal knowledge he knew about law firms from one-off conversations he’s had with his

father in the past.

But as time goes on- or, more accurately, Knox eats his first edible- he pretty much is a lost cause.

Cameron seems to accept it for what it was and opens up his law textbook, only half paying attention to Knox as he spends the better part of the last half-hour scrolling through a Beatles Facebook fan group page he's a part of, liking and commenting occasionally on some of the posts he comes across and ranting about it to Cameron all the while.

"'John and Yoko together again'. . " Knox reads off a little sluggishly when coming across a Facebook comment on a conspiracy post about how Yoko Ono might die soon since she had just given up the rights to her husband's music. "Give me a fucking *break*."

"What do you have against Yoko Ono in the first place?" Cameron asks, glancing up from his textbooks with a raise of his brow. "What did she ever do to you?"

"She *existed*," Knox seethes venomously. "I swear to god, Cameron, if I ever see her at a crowded street corner, I'm shoving her into oncoming traffic."

The words make Cameron slam his textbook.

"Okay, that's it. I'm going to call the others. I have no clue how to deal with you anymore."

At first, Knox thinks Cameron is joking when he says this; simply making a mere threat in an attempt to calm Knox down and veer him back on the path of focus. But then forty minutes go by and all of a sudden Knox finds Meeks and Pitts shouldering their way into his apartment.

"Knox Overstreet!" Pitts greets loudly, slamming the door behind him loudly. "What's up?"

"Pitts Gerard!" Knox hollers back with just as much enthusiasm, nearly falling flat on his face as he gets up from the recliner to go greet them. "Nothing much!"

From where he's still sitting on the living room couch, Cameron looks like he wants someone to slam the coffee table over his head.

Knox is excited to see them. Really, he *is*. But the noticeable absence of two poets makes him frown.

“Where’s Todd and-”

“They’re on a date to celebrate a year and six months together,” Pitts fills in, kicking off his shoes way less gracefully than Cameron had roughly an hour prior. “They said they were going to come over here when they finished. They want to play Cards Against Humanity.”

Knox nods in understanding and can’t help but feel thrilled.

Cards Against Humanity is his favorite. He isn’t as great as Charlie is at it, but- the game is still incredibly fun, and he hasn’t played it in a while.

Pitts and Meeks go on to take off their jackets and after not even taking a few steps into the kitchen, Pitts immediately perks up. Knox follows his line of sight to see that Pitts had just caught sight of the pan sitting on the kitchen table.

“Doth my eye deceive me?” he asks, already making grabby fingers. “Brownies?”

“*Pot* brownies,” Knox confirms with a smirk, and then, with all the likeliness of a little kid on Christmas morning, Pitts runs towards the pan.

“Get a plate, you animal!” Meeks hollers after him despite the fact that he’s a few steps behind him, and Cameron lets out a frustrated groan that echoes throughout the apartment as he throws his head against the back of the couch.

Knox doesn’t know exactly how it happens, but he knows *why*.

One minute he’s sitting on the recliner in the living room, laughing his ass off while he’s halfway through his second brownie. He’s listening to the wild story Pitts is telling him about how Meeks accidentally grabbed some poor old lady’s ass on their ride over here when he almost fell over and how he almost got into a fight with her husband because of it.

Then, Cameron makes some teasing comment about how he kinda enjoys the silence of the apartment when Charlie’s not around and Knox can’t help it- he starts *crying*.

Steadily in the back of his mind, the withdrawals from Charlie not being in the apartment were really starting to hone themselves in, but Cameron's comment had brought the truth right to the surface.

Cameron looks absolutely mortified by the sudden change of events, while Pitts appears to be trying his hardest not to laugh. Meeks is the only one who truly looks sympathetic, so Knox now knows in the long run who his real friend is out of the three of them.

When hearing the apartment door open Knox snaps his head towards it, but when he sees that it's Neil and Todd and *not* Charlie, Knox breaks down all over again and- Knox is pretty sure this is the hardest he's cried since Chris had broken up with him.

"Hey, Knox, sorry we're-" Neil starts, but comes to a stop when he sees that Knox is crying on the couch.

Pitts reaches out and pats Knox on the shoulder, which only makes Knox cry *harder*.

"C'mon, buddy," he mumbles, hauling Knox off the couch and towards the kitchen table. "We're gonna move you to the table."

Knox obediently lets Pitts drag him across the room and he collapses into the closest chair in his vicinity.

"What's- what's up with him?" Todd asks.

Cameron huffs and opens his mouth to reply, but Knox beats him to it.

"I miss him," Knox cries mournfully. "I miss him so fucking much."

"Who?" Neil asks, his brows furrowing in concern.

"*Charlie,*" Knox sobs. He makes a weak attempt to grab at the pan for another brownie, but Meeks slaps his hand away, and sternly tells him, "You're being cut off."

Knox pouts a tiny bit, but he knows not to cross Meeks. He opts for grabbing the glass of water Meeks had put in front of him instead, which earns him a proud smile.

Neil comes over to the table to take a seat next to Knox, grabbing the brownie Knox was going to go for with a look of hardly concealed amusement, and then the other poets are coming to sit down at the table as well.

“What is it that you miss about Charlie?” he asks gently, and now there is this wide smile spreading across his face as he takes a bite of his brownie; an obvious sign he was trying his hardest not to laugh.

“*All of him,* ” Knox whines, and proceeds to frown when he hears that everyone around the table is laughing at him. He has no clue why they think it’s funny; Charlie not being here wasn’t funny.
Knox *misses* him. Why do they have to rub it in his face that he wasn’t here? “I miss his smile, and his laugh, and- oh my fucking god, his *ass.* I really miss his ass. ”

The laughter grows louder, only making Knox grow more passionate in his soliloquy about Charlie’s ass.

“I miss his ass so fucking much. He has the best ass I’ve ever seen in my entire fucking life. It’s not *fair*. It’s *criminal.* Don’t you guys agree?”

When no one immediately answers his question, he turns to the first person that his eyes fall upon, who ends up being Pitts. “Don’t you agree, Pitts?” he repeats, needing *someone* to at least validate his opinion. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I mean, you asked one of the only two straight people in this room, so I don’t know what the hell kind of response you were expecting out of me,” he says. He pauses for a second. “But I will give Charlie where credit is due; he does in fact have a good ass.”

Knox slams his glass of water down on the table, causing everyone to startle in surprise.

“THANK YOU!” he hollers. “SOMEBODY HERE UNDERSTANDS!”

As his friends go back to laughing amongst themselves, Knox thinks back to how Charlie covered him up after falling asleep earlier. The thought fills him up with such a whiplash-inducing rush of fondness, and it’s only when he’s this relaxed, this *content,* that he’s able to admit to himself that-

“I actually think I might be in love with him.”

All of the laughter immediately dies down.

“You- *what*?” Meeks sputters, his eyes looking even more magnified behind his glasses than usual.

Knox shrugs. He feels as if what he said was obvious, something he didn't need to give clarification on it. He still does, anyway.

"I think I might be in love with Charlie."

The stunned silence that has fallen upon the kitchen drags on for an uncomfortable amount of time as all of his friends owlishly blink at him, various states of shock on their faces.

Neil ends up being the one to relieve all of them of the silence.

"Well, he's your boyfriend," he teases lightly, and even in Knox's weed-meddled mind, he can tell that the smile on Neil's face is a little off. "I would sure hope so."

"No he's not," Knox says with a sad shake of his head. "I *want* him to be, but he isn't."

Neil looks behind him to share a dumbfounded look with the others.

"What do you mean, he isn't?" he asks.

When noticing the confused look on his face, Todd adds, "We saw your relationship status on Facebook change," a small frown was beginning to form on his face. "We had thought it meant you told Charlie how you felt about him."

Knox lowers his eyes so he no longer has to look at his friends anymore, their gazes almost piercing.

Then, he fully registers what Todd just said.

" *We* ?"

"We all kind of suspected that you had feelings for him," Meeks fills in with an almost sympathetic smile. "You've never been very good at hiding your emotions."

And that was-

Great. This was just… fucking *brilliant*. If all of his friends have managed to figure out his feelings for Charlie on their own, then-

"Does he know?"

The poets share another look with each other.

“No, he doesn’t,” Pitts admits, and it makes Knox let out a sigh of relief. “But you seriously got to tell us what the fuck is going on here.”

Knowing that Pitts was right and that Knox is now backed into a corner he can’t get out of, he heaves a sigh and goes on to tell them about what happened yesterday evening; the phone calls both him and Charlie received, the argument that ended up happening between the two of them, the agreement. Knox purposely omitted all of the stuff about Charlie’s personal life- that was something he wanted Charlie himself to tell them- so he knows he was being a little bit vague at some points in the story. Nobody ends up intervening or questioning Knox about it, and instead, just opt to sit there patiently while Knox rants.

“You could always tell him how you feel,” Pitts suggests encouragingly when Knox finishes, smiling a tiny bit. “Who knows, he might like you back.”

“Oh no, I’m never telling him,” Knox shoots down automatically. “I don’t feel like he feels the same way about me.”

To his surprise, the group at large lets out variant groans of annoyance.

“What?” Knox demands. He was getting really tired of feeling so out of the loop all the time.

“Well, I don’t think him not liking you back is going to be an issue,” Cameron snorts with a painful-looking roll of his eyes. “Since he obviously-” but the fierce glare Neil ends up sending his way makes him fall silent. “Where did you say the Cards Against Humanity box was?”

Knox makes a vague, half-assed gesture towards the living room and Cameron nods his head and gets up. It takes him a few minutes of rummaging around, but he comes back into the kitchen with the giant box, as well as the few expansion packs Charlie had and the small stack of blank cards Knox and the rest of the poets have created over the years.

Pitts takes on the job of shuffling the cards, doing impressive tricks with them that even render Cameron a little speechless, and Knox is just thankful that the conversation has diverted from his hopeless feelings. He goes on to divide the deck into smaller sizes so everyone had a little pile to draw from and then he’s suddenly whipping white

cards at everyone at such a fast rate it was beginning to make Knox feel dizzy.

Once there are seven cards in front of him Knox finally flips his over, not being able to help the loud snicker he lets out as he looks over his cards:

Telling a shitty story that goes nowhere

Throwing grapes at a man until he loses touch with reality

A lifetime of sadness

Selling crack to children

Meeks, the omnipotent God

A vague fear of something called ISIS

Founding a major world religion

It is. . . an interesting selection, to say the least.

A few minutes of debating go by before Neil- being the ever-so-lovely commander in chief that he is- announces that he will be willing to be the judge first. He picks the black card off the top of the pile and proceeds to shake it dramatically, earning a few laughs and hoots from the group at large, before steadying the card so he can see what it says, his eyes squinting being a side effect of him not having his readers on him.

“In 2019,” Neil reads off in his impersonation of a dramatic movie trailer voice, and he has to cut himself off as the whole table breaks out into a fit of giggles. “Donald Trump eliminated all of our national parks to get rid of _.”

Pitts throws his head back, letting out a loud laugh as he slides his card across the table automatically. Cameron is the second to put his card down, arching his eyebrows confidently at everyone as he goes to draw a white card, something Pitts clearly forgot to do as he obnoxiously hisses *'shit'* before taking a card for himself.

Knox just feels at a loss; *none* of his cards fit the prompt.

After staring down at his cards for a few moments, he decides to throw in ‘a vague fear of something called ISIS’ and hope for the best, with Meeks following suit in putting down his card immediately after

Knox does.

The last to push their card forward is Todd, who after shuffling through his cards with furrowed brows, comes across the one he thinks is most promising. He offers up a sheepish look as he goes to draw a card, which Neil returns with a sickeningly fond, reassuring smile before he begins the process of shuffling up the cards.

When considering the shuffling complete, Neil begins flipping them over and reading them off.

“In 2019, Donald Trump eliminated all of our national parks to get rid of. . . all the boys I’ve fucked.”

Everyone chuckles a little bit, and Pitts lets out another loud laugh as he begins slamming his hand against the table. Clearly, the effects of the brownie he had eaten were truly starting to kick in and with the way Meeks began giggling when Neil reads off ‘a pizza guy who fucked up,’ he wasn’t falling too far behind.

Neil goes on to read the rest of the cards; Knox’s card thankfully gets a few chuckles out of everyone and the inevitable appearance of the classic ‘Bees?’ card that makes everyone snort. ‘The homosexual agenda’ ends up being the clear winner, and Todd takes the black card out of Neil’s hands with a small, accomplished smile.

With the way everyone was sitting around the circle, Todd actually ends up being the judge for this round. He reaches out wearily to grab the next black card and asks in such a serious voice that it makes Knox start cracking up, “Sir, we found you passed out naked on the side of the road. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Knox quickly puts down his ‘telling a shitty story going nowhere’ card, which ends up winning him the round much to Meeks disappointment, who had put down ‘reconciling quantum theory with general relativity.’

The game goes on like this for a few rounds; somebody takes on the role of being the judge and everyone else giggling amongst themselves at all of the cards being played.

At around eight Knox begins sobering up, and he has no clue if it’s because he has a different sense of humor from all of his friends when they get stoned or *what*, but he’s starting to disagree with some of the cards they were allowing to win each round, *especially* when Cameron wins the ‘what’s the latest bullshit that’s troubling this quaint fantasy

town?' round by playing 'grandma.'

Knox is currently finding himself in a heated debate about the play with an incredibly stoned out of his mind Pitts when Neil gets a phone call.

"Everybody shut up!" Neil hollers out, and after glancing down at his phone, he begins smirking. "Ohoooo, Knox! It's Charlie!"

The whole table breaks out into childish 'ooohs' and lewd comments that make Knox turn bright red, and he silently vows to himself right then and there that he's never going to eat edibles around his friends *again*.

Neil holds the phone up in front of his face and clicks the accept call button, and Meeks manages to get everyone to shut up by shushing insistently at them before the call goes through and Charlie's smirking face is lighting up Neil's phone.

He's sitting on the bed in whatever hotel room he's staying in and still has Knox's sweatshirt on, and the sight of him makes Knox's heart clench.

"Facetime, fucker!" Charlie hollers out in greeting and then suddenly his eyebrows scrunch together in confusion. "Wait, are you in my fucking *apartment* right now?"

"Yeah, Knox invited us over!" Neil says, his excitement a couple notches higher than what it usually was when they all hung out.

"They invited *themselves* over!" Knox quickly corrects, tugging a tiny bit on Neil's phone so that it was facing him. "Cameron was the only one I really invited over."

Charlie chuckles a little bit. Then the laugh immediately dies in his throat when he realizes what Knox just said.

"I'm sorry, did you say *Cameron*?"

After a few minutes of compromise and loud back and forth bickering from Cameron and Charlie about Charlie joining the game late, they manage to include Charlie in on the game despite him being a few hours away. They have Neil hold onto Charlie's cards and Charlie would text him what cards he would want to play for each round, only sitting out whenever it was Neil's turn to be the judge.

Including Charlie was quickly proving to be a mistake as he ends up dominating, winning the past few rounds he's played with relative ease.

At this point, everyone's sides are hurting- with the exception of Cameron's- as Charlie won Pitts's 'It lurks in the night. It hungers for flesh. This summer, no one is safe from_' black card by playing 'the stick up Richard Cameron's ass.'

The laughter only seems to grow louder when it becomes Knox's third turn to be the judge and he draws the 'What ended my last relationship?' card.

Seriously, he could not catch a fucking *break*, could he?

All of them push their cards towards him one by one, giggling amongst themselves as they do so, and they only quiet down when Knox gathers all of the cards and flips them over so they're face-up on the table.

And immediately wishes he hadn't.

He knew the cards were going to be bad, since his friends were downright *relentless*, but these cards hit a little too close to home, as what he had to pick from was:

The Devil Himself

Bisexuality

Knox's childish obsession with The Beatles

Not reciprocating oral sex

Cute Boys

Unfathomable stupidity

"Well, first of all," Knox says after a few minutes of staring down at the cards, almost at a complete loss of words. He has to project his voice a little louder than usual so he would be heard over the loud laughter that has erupted after Knox read off the cards. "I'm eliminating every card except for bisexuality and the devil himself, because I don't see those as personal attacks on my character."

Groans of disappointment ring out from everyone who Knox assumes didn't play those cards.

The only people who do not appear to be disappointed by his decision are Pitts and Todd, as Pitts lets out a loud, victorious whoop and Todd is silently sitting there with a pleased smile on his face, leaving Knox to assume it was only down to them two at this point.

“Bullshit!” Charlie manages to holler out over all the commotion going on in the room. “Your childish obsession with The Beatles was a factor in your breakup and you can’t even *deny* that it wasn’t!”

Knox has to restrain himself from hanging up the Facetime call.

“How did I fucking *know* you played that card?”

“Well, if there was a card that said ‘stalker-like tendencies’ I would’ve put that in but there’s not, so you ended up getting that one.” Charlie retorts, and now Knox is diving towards Neil’s iPhone with a newfound sense of vengeance.

Neil lets out a loud shriek of laughter as he hastily gets up from his chair with his phone, causing it to crash to the ground in his effort. Knox easily side-steps out of the path of the chair, feeling like a man on a mission as he chases Neil around the apartment, tripping over himself a few times in the process.

In the background, Cameron is exasperatedly trying to get them to sit back down, while Pitts’s screaming and Charlie’s loud laughter coming from Neil’s phone is just egging them on. Meeks and Todd are sitting at the table having a casual conversation like it was just a normal Saturday night, and for all intensive purposes, it *was*, and although Knox never ends up getting Neil’s phone, he ends up feeling pretty okay with that.

Knox ends up declaring ‘The Devil Himself’ the winner, which makes Pitts let out such a hilarious screech of victory it makes Knox’s sides hurt, and they end up playing a few more hours until they end up blowing through all the black cards.

Charlie- despite joining the game about halfway through them playing- ends up winning the game with twenty-five cards, and to the complete shock of everyone at the table, *Todd* comes in second place with twenty-one cards. Pitts comes in third with eighteen, Knox and Neil are both tied with thirteen, and Meeks has eleven, claiming the fourth place spot. Which leaves Cameron- to his disappointment and the amusement of everyone else- coming in last place with nine cards.

“It’s rigged!” Cameron accuses, squinting down at Neil’s phone so he

could fix Charlie with the most lethal glare he could muster. “How do you always manage to rig any game night we do against me?!”

“I can’t rig the game against you if you’re the unfunniest member of the friend group,” Charlie quips, and just like that, the arguing picks up.

It’s not until it’s nearing one in the morning when Charlie finally ends the Facetime with Neil, saying he had to get up for morning practice at seven and he was already going to be in a world of hurt, and shortly after all the other poets are standing up and getting their coats on, preparing to embark on the quick run out to Pitts’ BMW.

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright?” Meeks asks after he finishes buttoning up his peacoat, fixing Knox with squinted eyes as he adjusts his beanie. “I could come by tomorrow morning and we could read over each other’s papers?”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll be alright; Charlie’s in Cambridge, he’s not dead,” Knox tries to reassure brightly, despite the fact that his earlier actions were making it *seem* like Charlie had died. “Besides, I got work at ten.”

Meeks stares at him a little bit, trying to distinguish the expression on Knox’s face, before coming to a sort of silent conclusion and nodding his head.

“Call us if you need anything!” Neil hollers over his shoulder, taking Todd’s hand with one hand and opening the apartment door with his free one.

The rest of his friends holler out similar words of encouragement as they head out, and once Cameron closes the door shut behind him, all Knox can think about is how he has never wanted the weekend to come to an end so fast in his entire life.

There’s a saying Knox remembers hearing from somewhere- be it a sappy Facebook post his mother shared while his father was gone out of state for a court case or just from the internet in general- that time seems to move relatively slower when you miss someone you care about.

At first, Knox had thought the quote was being a little dramatic, because even though he was a self-declared hopeless romantic, he thought texting or phone calls would make up the void for not being

with a person face-to-face. But then these last few days happened, and with the way they went by at an almost grueling pace, Knox was beginning to find relatability in the words.

He somehow manages to find a way to completely fill his schedule in an attempt to get his mind off of Charlie; he takes up a few extra shifts at the library, has Facetime calls with the other poets, calls his family to let them know how school was going. Hell, he even goes for a few jogs, which was something Knox hasn't done in *months*.

All of these efforts quickly prove to end up being in vain, because if anything- Knox just ended up thinking about Charlie *more*.

He thinks about him in the tiniest aspects of his day to day life; he thinks of him when he sees a group of teenagers obnoxiously goofing off at one of the library tables. Or when skateboarders who are in a rush to get somewhere pass by him in a flash on the subway. He even thinks about Charlie late at night, when Knox is scrolling through the Netflix catalog, and wonders if Charlie would end up liking the movie he decides on watching or if Charlie would mercilessly make fun of him for it.

All Knox knows is that Charlie needed to come home. And *soon*. Because- to put it simply- he was starting to lose his fucking mind if he doesn't.

It wasn't until 11:37 on Wednesday evening that Knox finally ends up getting his wish.

He's sitting in the living room, watching *12 Angry Men* for easily the thousandth time when he hears the familiar sound of a key jiggling in the lock. The sound makes Knox feel as if his heart is running the fucking Boston Marathon as he snaps his head towards the door, because he already knows who was standing beyond the other side of the door without it even being open.

What feels like an absolute; lifetime goes by before the door finally rattles open, and with a shout of "fucking *finally*!" Charlie Dalton comes walking into their apartment.

He looks absolutely *drained*; his hair is messy, presumably from sleeping on the long bus ride, and in the hue of the overhead kitchen light, Knox can see light circles beginning to form underneath his eyes. He also has on Knox's sweatshirt and a pair of baggy sweatpants with the Columbia Lions logo on them, and all Knox can think is that Charlie has never looked more fucking breathtaking.

Charlie's not even a few steps in the apartment before Knox is off the couch and rushing towards him, engulfing him in such a tight hug he almost ends up knocking the wind out of himself in the process.

"*Shit!*" Charlie wheezes out.

In his state of surprise, he drops his smelly duffle bags to the floor, but he quickly brings his hands up to return Knox's hug, and Knox can't help the involuntary shudder that courses through his body as Charlie's hands find purchase at the center of his back.

They stand there in silence hugging each other for a few minutes- or it could've been a few seconds, Knox wasn't entirely sure- when Charlie pulls away a little bit to stare up at Knox. There's a myriad of expressions that cross Charlie's face- and it gives Knox the sensation that he's staring at a kaleidoscope- before an amused one finally settles there.

"I thought I said not to miss me too much?" Charlie asks with a teasing lilt. He takes a retreating step backwards, but his hands are still resting against Knox's back, and although his touch is practically scolding his skin through the fabric of his shirt, Knox is savoring the feeling of getting burnt.

"It's not fun making fun of Nolan when there isn't someone here to do it with," Knox says, like he hasn't been getting shit from all their friends constantly for the past few days about missing him. "Also, you seriously need to go take a shower; you fucking stink."

The comment makes Charlie roll his eyes as he fully retracts himself from Knox.

"Alright, alright, I get when I'm unwanted."

He walks around Knox, their shoulders brushing together as he walks past, and Knox stares unabashedly at Charlie as he heads down the hall towards the bathroom, frozen in place.

It's not until he reaches the bathroom doorway when Charlie turns around.

"You know, I really missed you, Knox," he says softly, and the honesty Knox can detect in the words make his heart leap in his chest and his legs almost give out from underneath himself.

It's a feeling he could drown from and he would love every second of

it.

“I-” Knox cuts himself off, breathless and so fucking scared. As nervous as he is to say the words, he knows he has to get them out. Especially since Charlie was the one who had gone and taken the leap first. “I really missed you, too.”

Charlie stares at Knox, his expression is still a little bit guarded until a shy looking smile creeps onto his face, and he walks into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Knox stands there for a few moments, staring at the door as he thinks back on Charlie’s words.

I missed you, Knox.

Knox couldn’t fight the wide, childish grin that broke across his face if he wanted to, and allows himself to start properly losing his mind.

Charlie missed him. Charlie missed *him*. And *smiled* when Knox said he missed him, too.

It was a sign, he was absolutely fucking sure of it. This *had* to be a sign that Charlie at least liked him back. Or, at least that he liked him a *little bit*.

“Fuck!” he whisper-yells excitedly, pumping his fists in the air. *"Yes!"*

In his state of pure elation, Knox takes a few staggering steps before he begins skidding across the floor in his socks, laughing to himself giddily as he does so and almost falling flat on his face in the process.

When he finally manages to compose himself he takes a deep breath and collapses back onto the couch, rewinding the movie back to where he was before Charlie had walked in.

And when Charlie walks back into the living room and sits down on the couch next to Knox- his damp hair messy from running a towel over it and clad in a rumpled Led Zeppelin shirt as he begins making fun of Knox for choosing to watch *12 Angry Men* again- Knox begins grinning to himself about it all over again.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on tumblr @yesterdayandtodayy if you'd like to spam me/talk about DPS/ anything!

Take a Sad Song & Make It Better

Chapter Summary

Knox and Charlie head off to Cape Cod for Thanksgiving break, and get a few days of peace before Charlie's parents show up

Chapter Notes

So my original idea was to have all of the events of thanksgiving break be condensed into one chapter, but after getting 10k words deep into this chapter, I just realized that was something that was NOT possible, and decided to split up the events of Thanksgiving into two chapters, so I apologize about that (but on the bright side, you guys might be getting the next chapter Friday, if I keep writing at the pace I'm currently writing at)!
As always, shout out to @auxctor for beta-ing this absolute bohemoth of a chapter; not only has he stayed up late during finals week to help me brainstorm and piece this chapter together piece by piece, but they're seriously just the greatest friend/beta EVER. So give his recently finished anderperry fic 'Speak Low' all the love and tell him I sent you ;)
ALSO, thank you all again so much for reading this fic! All of your comments, kudos, and bookmarks on the last chapter warmed my heart, and I'm so glad you loved all of the poet's chaos just as much as I loved writing it! Now, without further ado, let's let the thanksgiving shit show commence, shall we?

TW FOR THE FOLLOWING:
- Referenced homophobia is going to become a MAJOR part of these next two chapters- because Charlie's parents are THE WORST- so if reading passages of blatant homophobia makes you uncomfortable, you should proceed with caution, although this doesn't happen until his parents show up at the end of this chapter and it's not as apparent as it will be in the next chapter
- There is depictions of emotional abuse- past and present- that Charlie undergoes in this chapter from his parents
And finally:
- There is a scene where Charlie accidentally cuts his hand near the end of the chapter and there is light blood, so if cutting or knives is something that may be a trigger to you, I suggest to skip over this scene (which starts right after Charlie's parents leave and go up stairs)

Again, thank you all for all the support this fic has garnered so far, and stay safe!

Over the next two weeks before Columbia lets out for their week-long Thanksgiving break, both Charlie and Knox go back to brushing up on the backstory to their fake-relationship. The whole entire experience is giving Knox massive deja-vu from a few months ago when they found themselves in the same situation the evening prior to Chris's party, except this time around there is definitely more risk involved; they had to keep up the charade of dating over the span of a few days rather than just a few hours, and this was Charlie's family they were doing it in front of- who were for all Knox knew, just about the scummiest people to ever walk the Earth.

Charlie never does fully explain the whole deal with his family, and after the phone call he had with Neil, Knox wasn't really expecting him to or was pissed with him for not doing so. The little pieces he did manage to scrape up from little offhanded comments Knox wrote down on his notebook to keep in mind so he can be the absolute best boyfriend in front of Charlie's family.

So, while most of his classmates were excited about the week off, Knox was finding himself stressed about what his thanksgiving was going to be like.

Not to mention, there were the changes beginning to occur in his relationship with Charlie.

If Knox hadn't been overthinking his interactions with Charlie as much as he had been in the last two weeks, the transition might've completely gone over his head. But ever since Charlie had gotten back from his soccer tournaments that rounded off the end of his junior year soccer season, Knox began picking up on some things, to the point where it was becoming nearly impossible to ignore them.

For instance, there was more accidental touches that occurred between them; a brush of hands while they were walking side by side down the sidewalk or their elbows knocking together while they were sitting on the couch together late at night. Each touch was reeling and made Knox crave more, and he found himself once or twice reaching out to clasp onto Charlie's elbow while watching a horror movie just so that he would be able to touch him.

The second thing Knox noticed was the increasing amounts of prolonged eye-contact; he would catch Charlie staring at him more,

and Charlie would catch Knox staring right back. It was something he could tell it was driving all their friends crazy- particularly Neil and Pitts- but surprisingly nobody was vocal with their annoyance about any of it, even if Knox did catch Cameron's frustratingly annoying pointed looks he would give Knox after him and Charlie would break eye-contact.

The third and final thing was that a new, unspoken tradition that would occur between the two of them is that they would fall asleep on the couch together late at night. The first time Knox woke up with Charlie's head on his shoulder, his legs bent inwards as his body curled into Knox's side, Knox just about had a fucking stroke and swore he was in heaven, but assumed it was a one time thing.

It quickly was proving to be more than a one-time thing, however. In fact, it was almost a rarity over these two weeks for the two of them to go back into their own rooms to go to sleep and each time Knox would get in his own bed, he felt weird without Charlie there laying right next to him.

It all went beyond stuff 'just friends' would do, Knox was a hundred percent certain of that. Friends didn't fall asleep cuddling onto the couch next to their friends and friends didn't spend unusual amounts of time just silently staring at the other.

Yet Charlie still acted like everything was normal, so Knox decided to do the same thing.

Rushing things wouldn't lead to anything good; he wanted- *whatever this was* - to happen naturally. He also knew that if he ever confronted Charlie about what was happening between them Charlie would clam up, make some sarcastic quip about how Knox was 'reading too much into things' and cut off whatever this was. And that was something Knox just couldn't afford to jeopardize.

So, he wills himself to just let everything play out naturally, even if his little kindergartener-with-a-crush heart was throwing a tantrum for him to do otherwise.

The night before Charlie and Knox head out to Cape Cod everyone comes over to their apartment to celebrate Knox's twenty-first birthday, since all of them were going to be home with their families during Thanksgiving break and they wouldn't get to see Knox on his birthday- which fell on Black Friday this year. All of them managed to take off some of the stress about what the upcoming week was going

to entail, despite Charlie giving him a wrapped cantaloupe and a Yoko Ono vinyl as his birthday present, but Knox still appreciated all of his friends nonetheless, even if he knows he's going to Goodwill the next time Charlie went off to classes to donate that abysmal record.

Somewhere around the halfway point to Cape Cod, Knox feels his left leg beginning to fall asleep.

He's been driving non-stop for the past two hours, wanting to make up for the time they had lost as a result of them sleeping through the alarms they had set, so he has ignored every request Charlie has had so far to pull over at one of the weird tourist attractions he's spotted on the side of the road.

"What time we got?" Knox asks. He takes a glance at Charlie, who is sitting in the passenger seat with his legs crossed and his Ray-Bans on as he taps his fingers to the rhythm of The Kinks 'Waterloo Sunset.' He looks like he doesn't have a care in the world and the skin of his neck is glistening in the sunlight in a way that makes Knox want to lean over the center counsel and bite it.

Knox stops at the red light he's coming up on and he takes the opportunity to steal another look at Charlie, to see he's pulling his phone out of his front pants pocket.

"Four forty-five," is the answer he receives and Knox nods his head, pleased. They're doing a lot better with the time than he thought they were.

He continues driving down Highway 84 for another ten minutes and the closer they head towards the outskirts of Hartford, the more blue signs begin appearing on the side of the road.

More than anything, Knox wants something to eat. He hasn't eaten anything except for the Twix bar he'd split with Charlie and hastily ate while driving down the highway a few hours prior.

He wants to tell Charlie this, thinking maybe he'd want something to eat, too.

"Your parents are going to hate me," is what comes out of his mouth instead.

Out of his peripheral, Knox can see Charlie lifting the Ray-Bans off his face to fix Knox with a confused look.

“What?”

“Your parents are going to hate me,” Knox repeats.

It’s something that’s been etching away at his brain for the entirety of the drive so far. He knows Charlie’s parents aren’t great people, but he still wants to make a good impression on them; he wants to show them that he really likes their son, that- if this unspoken thing going on between him and Charlie mounts into a living, breathing relationship that isn’t entirely for show- he will take good care of Charlie and do right by him.

To Knox’s surprise, Charlie *snorts* at hearing that.

“Relax, my parents aren’t gonna hate you,” Charlie rolls his eyes. “I mean, they think I’m a piece of shit and am the family disappointment, but they’re gonna *love* you.”

Knox frowns and clutches tighter onto the steering wheel when Charlie laughs.

“That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

No it’s not , Knox thinks, his teeth grinding together slightly. He takes a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure he’s in the clear before he turns on his blinker and gets off of the freeway. He keeps going until he parks in the parking lot of a Shake Shack and parks his car in the parking lot.

Not being able to handle the silence anymore, Knox turns to Charlie.

“Do you want to drive the rest of the way?” he asks.

Charlie blinks at him as he unbuckles his seatbelt, clearly surprised.

“You’d actually let me drive the rest of the way?”

Knox wants to immediately take back the words, but he sees how excited Charlie gets at the prospect of driving, and Knox knows he doesn’t want to diminish the absolutely adorable look of giddy on Charlie’s face. So, he nods his head.

“Yeah, my foot’s starting to fall asleep. I could use a break.”

Knox is rewarded with a bright grin in return and he has to practically

run after Charlie into Shake Shake.

They order burgers and milkshakes and take up the opportunity of having a break from sitting in Knox's cramped car by sitting at a booth inside the restaurant. They take their time, laughing at dumb shit, dipping fries into their milkshakes and stretching their legs out all the while.

Afterward, Knox drives down the road to fill up his car with gas and it's not until he comes out of the gas station after paying that he throws his car keys at Charlie, who is already sitting in the driver's seat.

Charlie catches the keys one-handed- because *of course* he does- and with a playful rev of the engine he sets off, and Knox immediately gets hit with the brutal reminder exactly *why* he never lets Charlie drive whenever he's in the car with him.

Charlie drives like he does everything else in life; a tiny bit careless, and *definitely* too frenetic than he should be. He's going a good thirty miles above the speed limit, swerving in and out of traffic like he's in a police chase that would give OJ Simpson a run for his money, occasionally turning his whole body towards Knox every time he would try to say something and going on his phone so he could text someone.

Knox white knuckles the hanging car handle in his car for the entirety of the drive and at one point snatches the cellphone out of Charlie's hands in an attempt to limit any distractions, and it's not until they finally, *finally* arrive in Cape Cod that he feels like he can properly breathe.

As if seeing Knox's state of mental unrest, Charlie gives him a wide grin.

"You doing alright there, Knoxious?" he asks as he turns into one of the gated residential communities.

"Am I actually alive?" are the only words Knox is capable enough to reply with. With how nice all the houses they have been driving by are, them being dead wouldn't have been such a far stretch from the truth.

Charlie lets out a loud cackle at that.

"I'm an amazing driver, what are you talking about."

“I felt like my life was threatened the entire time.”

Charlie ignores him, focusing on driving a tiny bit further down the street until he pulls into the driveway of the house at the very end of the street.

All Knox can do is stare. And stare. And *stare,* because-

“Uh, Charlie?” Knox asks, staring at the house in front of him with wide eyes.

“Yeah?” Charlie asks, sounding unfazed as he puts the car into park. Which Knox cannot understand for the fucking life of him, because-

“You- do you realize this house is about triple the size of mine, right?”

Knox isn’t exaggerating, the house in front of him was *huge* ; a white beach house that was so big it was starting to intimidate him, and Knox can’t help but think that his Chevy Cruze sticks out like a sore thumb in comparison to all the luxury cars parked in the driveways of the other houses. It made Chris’s house look like a damn dollhouse.

Charlie makes no further comment as he throws Knox’s car keys back at him and reaches in the backseat for his bag before exiting the car, leaving Knox to sit in bewilderment at the house in front of him for a few moments before he finally regains his composure and grabs his bags, following Charlie towards where he is standing on the porch fiddling with a set of keys he pulled out of his bag.

Knox comes up behind Charlie, taking a few moments to stare at the look of concentration on his face as he messes around with the lock on the mahogany door.

Knox’s mouth twitches.

“You need my help?”

“Shut up, I got it,” Charlie snaps back, which makes Knox laugh. He fiddles with the lock for another few minutes before he’s finally able to push open the door and they step inside, and Knox is just as blown away by the inside of the house as he was by the outside; there’s a giant rock fireplace that was acting as a support beam in the very center of the room, glaringly bright white walls accented with brown that match the modern but grand looking staircase leading up to the second floor, which is opened up over the foyer. To put it simply the

environment is pristine, not a thing out of place and looking like it came straight out of a *Ralph Lauren Home* catalog. It's a complete juxtaposition to Charlie.

"You grew up *here?* " Knox asks incredulously as he eyes the *chandelier* hanging above the foyer.

Charlie laughs at Knox's awe, kicking off his shoes hazardously. When he looks up at Knox, there's an expression he can't quite place on his face.

"Unfortunately."

Charlie walks through the living room, his silent way of telling Knox he was going to show him around the house. Knox goes to follow him when something suddenly catches his eye.

It's tucked away in the corner of the room, gleaming and elegant, and it's most likely more expensive than Knox's car or any of the other gift he's ever received *combined* .

With an almost child-like fascination, he starts walking towards it.

"You never struck me as a piano man, Dalton."

Charlie turns around to fix Knox with a look of confusion, which fades as soon as he registers where Knox is standing.

"I'm not Billy Joel or anything, so don't be getting too excited," he says, making his way towards Knox. "My parents made me learn; they thought it would 'teach me good discipline.' That it would 'be a good life skill to have.'" Charlie rolls his eyes at the quotations. "Needless to say, it didn't really work out too well for them."

"Do you know anything?" Knox asks, trying his hardest not to ponder on any thought retaining to Charlie's parents. Every time he even remotely thought of their existence, he was filled with unbridled nervousness and agitation.
"I don't really remember how to read sheet music since the last time I took lessons was over ten years ago," Charlie tells him. "But I remember the notes . . . some scales and a few songs, too."

Knox reaches out and runs a longing finger over a few of the keys.

"I've always wanted to learn," he admits softly.

He was always a little bit envious of people who had any shred of musical talent; they had such a beautiful way of expressing themselves in a way that some people never could. They could just walk up to a random guitar or piano while they were out in public and just . . *play* something right off the top of their heads. It was something that never ceased to amaze him.

“It’s not too late, you know,” Charlie says, leaning his hip up against the piano with his arms casually crossed over his chest. “You could still try to learn.”

“I’m a lost cause at this point, believe me,” Knox laughs and comes short when he sees Charlie is frowning at him. “What?”

Charlie purses his lips, but he still doesn’t say anything.

“Nothing,” he eventually replies before pushing himself off the piano. He begins to walk away, and when he notices that Knox isn’t following him, he turns around and calls over his shoulder, “You coming or not, Knoxious?” with a jerk of his head.

Knox hurries to follow Charlie the hall, but not before taking a final glance over his shoulder.

Charlie shows Knox around the rest of the house in the same casual yet unimpressed manner he had when they arrived, and Knox takes in his surroundings with wide eyes; the high ceilings, the expensive-looking floors and granite countertops, the porches that overlooked the sandy shores of Hyannis Port.

It completely blows his mind that Charlie was able to grow up in a house like this- that Knox was getting the opportunity to *stay* in a house that looked like this. He cannot understand how Charlie can act so indifferent to his surroundings.

A room Knox quickly realizes Charlie is withholding from showing him on the tour is his bedroom, and when Charlie finally stops in front of one of the identical-looking white doors on the second floor of the house, Knox immediately knows it’s Charlie’s room. Not only because this door has some chipped away paint on it and makes it the only sign that there were people who actually inhabit this house, but also because of the mischievous yet excited expression on Charlie’s face.

He sends a wink over his shoulder towards Knox as he opens the bedroom door, doing a good job of building up the suspense.

“And this here is my-” he begins dramatically, but cuts himself off when the door fully opens.

Charlie’s childhood room is expectantly huge, but unexpectedly clean. Almost eerily so.

There are no posters hanging on the walls of this room like they are in Charlie’s room back at their apartment and the walls are painted the same white as the rest of the house. There are no real decorations in the room other than a white desk, a white nightstand, and an uncomfortable-looking gray futon that’s the same color as the gray comforter on Charlie’s bed.

Knox walks over to the futon and puts his bag down on it as a form of claim that he was going to be sleeping there tonight. Knowing Charlie, he would want Knox to sleep in the bed and have him take the couch, and there was no way in hell Knox was letting him not sleep in the bed in his own room.

“Did your room always look like this growing up?” Knox asks, taking another look around the room. “Because if it was this empty I’m sorry to say it, but you might be a sociopath.”

Charlie shakes his head mutely and when he looks at Knox, Knox is hit with a dreadful feeling that something was wrong.

“It wasn’t,” he whispers.

And that’s when Knox fucking realizes.

“They- they seriously got rid of all your shit? Are you *serious?* ”

Charlie shrugs weakly, putting his bag down on the floor near the foot of his bed.

“I mean I moved out, so I was kinda expecting them to.”

Knox shakes his head.

“Charlie, they still didn’t have the right to just- get rid of your stuff without talking to you about it, first. There’s probably some things you had in here that-”

“Drop it.”

Knox opens and closes his mouth, baffled.

“How could you possibly want to drop it?” he asks. How could he *possibly* be defending his parents about this? “They-”

Knox stops short when catching the look on Charlie’s face and he quickly realizes there was no point in arguing this further. Charlie wasn’t going to budge, even if he was clearly upset. “It’s starting to get late. We should go to that French restaurant you were telling me about before rush-hour happens.”

The words don’t exactly do wonders in cheering Charlie up, but he at least gives Knox a tight smile at the suggestion.

“I thought you said you didn’t like French food,” he says and his eyes a little accusatory as he stares up at Knox.

“I never *had* French food, there’s a difference,” Knox quickly corrects. “I’m trusting your opinion, here.”

Charlie continues to stare up at him before he nods his head.

“Okay. I’m down for that.”

Knox attempts a smile.“We don’t have anything fancy other than what we’re wearing on thanksgiving, so we’re probably gonna have to show up to the restaurant in our sweatshirts,” he warns, but Charlie doesn’t look deterred.

“We could just go grab some of my parent’s coats from the mudroom and just wear those during the whole meal?” Charlie suggests. “As long as we put everything back where we got it, they’ll never know we borrowed anything.”

The idea makes Knox feel a tiny bit anxious, but he finds himself nodding and he follows Charlie down to the first floor to the mudroom.

Charlie walks towards the closet with a weird sort of confidence, like he was going to open the doors and expect to see Narnia on the other side.

“Alright, Knoxious, what kind of look do we want to go for?” Charlie ponders teasingly shuffling clothes around in the closet as he talks. “We could go for the late-night sea captain or the Chanel Phantom of the Oper-AHHH!” Charlie suddenly cuts himself off with a high-pitched, leaping back comically as he does so.

“What? What is it?” Knox demands, looking between the closet and Charlie, who had leaped so far back that his back was pressed against Knox.

“There’s a fucking spider in there,” he huffs, turning to look up at Knox with a wide-eyed look.

Knox immediately understood Charlie’s reaction; spiders were one of the only things he outwardly showed fear of.

“Hey, I’ll go kill it for-” Knox starts and goes to move around Charlie to grab the roll of paper towel off the washing machine when Charlie grabs onto Knox’s wrist tightly, stopping him in his tracks.

“You don’t understand, that thing was fucking *huge* ,” Charlie emphasizes. “Like Shelob from *Lord of the Rings* huge.”

Knox gently detaches Charlie’s hand from his wrist, smiling in amusement.

“Charlie, don’t worry about me, spiders don’t bother me that much.”

“Well, you haven’t seen this one, but go ahead I guess,” Charlie mumbles.

Clenching his jaw, Knox slowly approaches the closet like he was a man on a mission and he just reaches the threshold of the closet entrance when he feels a hand touch his shoulder.

“Fucking *Charlie* -” Knox hisses, turning around to face him. “You almost just made me shit my fucking pants.”

“I thought you heard me coming up behind you!” Charlie whispers fiercely. He slowly peeks his head around Knox’s body to peer into the closet, not taking his hand off Knox’s shoulder as he does so.

Nothing happens for a few seconds until the spider in question makes its appearance, making Knox and Charlie startle a tiny bit.

For once Charlie hadn’t been slightly over-dramatic in his proclamations; the spider was about the size of Knox’s palm, not to mention the fucker moved *fast* .

Charlie tightly wraps his arms around Knox’s shoulders at the sight of it, and Knox swears if he squeezes hard enough, he is going to cut off Knox’s windpipe.

“There it is!” he whispers fiercely, pointing frenetically at the black mass slowly crawling across the floor. “ *Get it!”*

“Charlie I know, I-” Knox says impatiently with a lift of his hand and just when he’s about to go in for the kill, Charlie accidentally moves one of his mother’s Versace trench coats in his state of fear, which triggered the arrival of about a dozen baby spiders.

Or what Knox *assumed* to be the babies; they were still massive, about half of the mother’s size, but that still didn’t make them any less frightening.

“Abort!” Charlie screams, already running towards the exit and leaving Knox for dead. “ABORT!”

Knox is quick to obey and he barely manages to close the door behind him before they flee the mudroom, practically stumbling over themselves and laughing in their state of nerves, and they keep on running until they reach Knox’s car outside.

Charlie collapses into the passenger seat, his forearm thrown over his eyes as he breathes heavily.

“Fuck- never again. *Never again* ,” he babbles incoherently.

Knox laughs out his breathless agreement, despite not really knowing what Charlie was saying. His hands still shake a tiny bit from the adrenaline coursing through his body from running as he starts up the car, but the promising thought of food is enough to calm him down a little bit as he pulls out of Charlie’s driveway, turning up the Stones song that comes on the radio to brighten the mood and it’s not until they are pulling in the parking lot of the restaurant that Knox realizes they never even grabbed the coats they went into the mudroom for the first place for.

Dinner at a five-star restaurant with Charlie Dalton ended up being an *experience* , to say the least.

For starters, the two of them ended up being way too underdressed in comparison to the other restaurant patrons, who were all looking at the sweatshirts and skinny jeans Knox and Charlie were wearing with distasteful expressions on their faces.

Like they had any room to talk , Knox had thought vehemently, *All of them looked like they would turn into a pile of dust if he so much as*

breathed on them too hard.

Judging looks be damned, Knox managed to look past the patrons as he and Charlie were led to a table near the middle of the restaurant, and if Knox thought about it hard enough, he could pretend that they were here on a romantic date celebrating a major anniversary of some kind instead of two friends who were starving after a nearly four and a half-hour-long drive.

And then all the illusions he was starting to build up in his head got eradicated when he finally got the menu.

It was bad enough the entire thing was in cursive and was typed out in a .5 sized font. But when Knox managed to decipher whatever the words were he just about had a stroke for two reasons.

The first one was that Knox had no clue what the hell any of this food was or even how to *pronounce it* . Most of it all was seafood- which Knox wasn't all that crazy for- but one of his go-to rules in life thus far was to not eat any foods he wasn't able to identify and no matter how childish Charlie called him for having a rule like that.

The second was the *prices* . Everything was ridiculously overpriced. Seriously, what kind of restaurant charges over thirty dollars for a fucking *salad* ?

Charlie doesn't seem nearly as deterred by the prices as Knox was, and he instead kept glancing at Knox over the top of his menu every once in a while to send him a mischievous grin or to make some wry comment about what some of the other old people in the restaurant were wearing, and when the time came to pay for the almost *three hundred dollar* restaurant bill, Charlie had pulled out his credit card without so much as a blink of an eye or a flinch, simply mouthing the words 'birthday present' to Knox as their waiter walked away.

As guilty as Knox had felt about leaving Charlie to pay for the bill, he couldn't help but feel he deserved at least a *little* compensation for Charlie getting him a fucking gift-wrapped *cantaloupe* for his birthday so he just goes along with it, but after thanking Charlie so profusely and so many times that Charlie yelled at him to shut up.

Despite the drive to Charlie's house from the french restaurant only being ten minutes, with how exhausted Knox felt after finally eating a decent meal after eating greasy fast food all day, he was just about ready to pass the fuck out and upon walking through the front door the two of them automatically make their way upstairs towards

Charlie's room to go to bed, even if it hadn't reached nine o'clock yet.

They purposely avoid looking at the mudroom as they make their way up the stairs and Charlie quickly declares the room off-limits, something Knox doesn't need to be told twice about; he wouldn't go anywhere near the closet those spiders are in with a ten-foot pole, even if he knew it was best to just kill them so they wouldn't have another problem to worry about.

When walking into Charlie's room Knox walks over to his stuff so he can grab his sweatpants, and Charlie leaves the room while Knox gets changed so he can head down the hall to grab Knox blankets from one of the other bedrooms in the house.

Knox is situating himself on the futon when Charlie re-emerges, carrying the most comfortable looking bundle of blankets that Knox has ever *seen* , and a few pillows were tucked underneath Charlie's arm.

"Thank y-" Knox starts, but he can't even get the rest of the words out because Charlie throws the blankets right at Knox's face, effectively muffling him.

He scrambles to get the blankets off his face with a huff, only to see Charlie retreating into the bathroom that's connected to his bedroom with his pajamas, laughing to himself as he goes.

"You fucker!" Knox yells, attempting to throw one of the pillows Charlie had given him at his back. His attempt ends up being in vain, however, as Charlie manages to close the bathroom door just before it hits and the pillow ends up colliding with the bathroom door instead.

As soon as the door closes Knox adjusts himself on the couch, moving the pillows and blankets around until he manages to get comfortable. He doesn't go to sleep, despite how strained his muscles feel, so he stares up at the ceiling and taps his fingers on his chest idly in an attempt to distract himself from the fact he hears the bathroom shower turn on.

Practically a lifetime goes by like this until the shower turns off and the bathroom door creaks open, and finally Charlie comes out, wearing gray sweatpants and-

And no fucking shirt .

Knox has seen Charlie without a shirt a countless number of times;

they were *roommates* . They've known each other for *years* . But over the past month of being in a 'hopelessly-falling-for' stage for Charlie only makes the sight of Charlie shirtless something that always managed to take Knox's breath away, and his lean muscles from soccer practice coupled with the overwhelming smell of the coconut shampoo Charlie had used while in the shower made Knox's heart flutter.

When Charlie fully turns around Knox tenses and in a panic he closes his eyes tightly, hoping to make it look like he had fallen asleep while Charlie was in the shower and that he wasn't practically *ogling* him a few seconds ago.

He can hear Charlie flick off the light in the bathroom before walking across the room. His bed creaks a tiny bit as he crawls in it and as soon as Charlie stops moving, an almost agonizing silence falls upon the room.

A minute elapses. Then two.
"I know you're not asleep." Charlie's voice quietly rises from the silence.

Well. So much for that idea.

Knox shuffles a little bit on the couch and opens his eyes to see Charlie intently looking at him in the dark.

"What gave it away?"

"Nobody sleeps with their muscles *that* tense."

Knox sends Charlie a defensive look. "Well, what's your excuse?"

"Same as you," Charlie says simply, bringing the sheets closer in on himself. "Can't sleep."

Knox immediately thinks about Charlie's parents coming into town in a few days, so he actually thinks Charlie is going to say something serious for a change. That does not end up being the case, and instead, all that comes out of his mouth is:

"It's just- every time I close my eyes, I see a hundred spiders gunning it for me."

And Knox can't help himself. He starts laughing. He laughs so hard it begins to reverberate the couch and then Charlie is laughing, too,

from his place on the bed.

“Jesus Christ, there had to have been at least a hundred of them,” Knox breathes, wiping a tear from his eyes.

“At least!” Charlie agrees, sounding completely breathless from how hard he has been laughing.

“How long do you think they had been in there for?” Knox asks.

“Beats me. Years, probably?” Charlie reaches up to rub at his eyes. “You keep making me laugh this hard, I’m gonna piss myself.”

Their laughter dies down a tiny bit and the room falls silent as Knox ponders Charlie’s answer.

For once, Knox is the one who breaks the silence that has fallen between them.

“If I really wanted I could sue you for this.”

“For *what* ?” Charlie demands incredulously, snapping his head towards Knox so fast that it only makes Knox’s laughter start building up again.

“Child endangerment,” he barely manages to get out.

“Child endanger- Knox, you’re *twenty* ,” Charlie sighs exasperatedly, like he was done with Knox’s bullshit. At this point, he probably was. “You’re gonna be twenty-one *Friday* .”

Knox lays there for God knows how long, his head tilted up towards the ceiling as he laughs and *laughs* and God, this has got to be the hardest Knox has laughed in a long time, even if it was over something incredibly stupid.

It’s not until he’s calmed down that he remembers something.

“Weren’t you gonna go to the bathroom?”

“Fuck!”

And seeing Charlie stumble out of his bed to make his way into the adjoining bathroom only made him dissolve into a hard fit of laughter all over again.

Over the next few days, Knox and Charlie fall into an unofficial but fairly cemented routine.

In the mornings they would immediately go to the kitchen, either eating leftovers from whatever restaurant they ordered from the night before or omelets Knox would make for the two of them, sharing sarcastic quips with one another between mouthfuls of food and discuss their ideas for what the day ahead of them would entail based off of random ideas Charlie would blurt out.

After eating breakfast (or more accurately, while Knox was attempting finishing up his breakfast) Charlie would herd Knox out of the kitchen and into the living room where he would attempt to teach him whatever basics he remembered from playing piano in elementary school.

The first morning Charlie had dragged him by the wrist towards the grand piano bench Knox stuttered out something about how he didn't want Charlie to go through the effort of teaching him, but he gave up all arguing when Charlie shot a hard look over his shoulder after listening to Knox's helpless rambling and said, "It's a part of your birthday present from me. Now shut up and sit down on the bench or else I'll live with Cameron in the dorms next year."

The comment was enough to get Knox to shut up, and the late morning piano lessons with Charlie have commenced ever since.

Knox wasn't very good, if he was being completely honest with himself; his hands moved far too clumsily over the keys then they should and he kept forgetting where all of the notes except for middle C were, but Charlie never complained or got short with Knox for not catching on right away. Instead, he laughs as he explains his way through telling Knox the note names and basic scales for the third time. And while he often went on to tease Knox about his bad memory before explaining things over again, he never seems too bothered, quickly falling into the role of exasperated but highly amused teacher with such an ease that it made Knox's heart warm.

Charlie was going to be such an amazing teacher, Knox was absolutely sure of it.

It was just a shame Knox was such a terrible student.

"Dalton, my hands cramping," Knox complains after shakily playing through a C Major scale for what had to be the hundredth time within the past half an hour. "I think we should stop."

“That’s *maestro* Dalton to you,” Charlie corrects playfully. “And don’t be so ridiculous, you’re doing fine.”

“I’m not being ridiculous, I feel like I’m getting worse.”

“You’re not, trust me,” Charlie sends him a lazy smile and nudges Knox with his thigh. “Play it for me one more time. Just relax your hands a little, I notice they’re getting a little tense.” As he talks, he reaches his hands so that they’re resting on top of his, and Knox swears he forgets out to fucking *breathe* with the way Charlie’s fingers begin gently massaging over his knuckles. “You think you can do that for me?”

“I-I think so, yeah,” Knox splutters.

Charlie quirks an amused looking eyebrow at him. “Can you?”

“I, yeah. I- shut up.”

Charlie laughs and retracts his hands away so he can lean an elbow against the music rack.

He tilts his chin up at Knox, a silent cue for him to begin playing whenever he’s ready, and after taking a few seconds to compose himself, Knox goes on to play the scale.

By some sort of miracle, Knox manages to hit all of the correct notes, though he plays them way slower and less gracefully than Charlie had done when demonstrating how to play the scale earlier, but when he finishes he cannot help the loud noise of triumph he lets out.

“I did it!” he shouts gleefully, grinning widely at Charlie. “Holy fuck- Charlie, did you *see* that?”

Charlie sends him a tiny, pleased smile in return.

“I did,” he says. More quietly, he murmurs: “I knew you could do it,” but he says it so softly that Knox cannot decide whether or not he actually heard him.

At around noon Charlie would call their lessons done for the day and they would hurry up and get ready so they could head off to follow through with whatever activity they had planned.

It was the most peaceful and in love with life Knox has felt in a long time; discovering all of Charlie’s favorite childhood haunts, sitting

around the porch's fireplace late at night with him as they stared at the stars and contemplated anything and everything, from the meaning of life to whether or not aliens existed.

Going to the beach was probably Knox's favorite. The weather made the ocean far too cold for swimming so they would just walk along the shore, but Knox didn't mind, since as they walked he would get to hear Charlie tell stories about Welton and the soccer team and the good parts of his childhood. As much as Knox treasured hearing all of Charlie's stories and has gone on to memorize everything he was being told, Knox would always get caught up in how gorgeous Charlie looked in these moments; his eyes lit up this certain way when recounting a particularly fond memory and he would send Knox this crooked smile as his hair blew viciously in the wind. He never seemed fazed by the chilly wind or the overwhelming smell of seaspray and would just keep grinning in this way that made Knox think Charlie might've been in love with life right now, too.

It's almost crazy how drastically the mood shifts when Charlie's parents arrive.

They were watching Twin Peaks on the couch in the living room, takeout from Charlie's favorite Japanese place spread out on the coffee table when Knox can hear the sound of a car door slamming in the distance over the steady sound of the falling rain.

Knox can see Charlie flinch from where he was curled up on one of the armchairs, and Knox knew for a fact it wasn't because Laura Palmer's killer was revealed.

He reaches towards the remote and turns off the TV.

"Charlie, is that-"

"Yeah."

Charlie throws the remote in the direction of the coffee table and he misses, causing the remote to clutter to the floor, but Charlie doesn't seem too fazed by the fact that he missed as he attempts to furiously crease out the wrinkles from his sweatshirt and pants as he does stands. As if still realizing Knox was still sitting on the couch, he looks over to send Knox an almost-incredulous look.

"My parents are going to want us to greet them when they walk in," he says. "They're going to get on my ass about it if we don't."

Knox hurries to follow Charlie. He's barely off the couch and standing shoulder to shoulder with Charlie in the foyer of the house when the door clicks open and with a shaky breath from Charlie, Knox watches as Charlie's parents make their way through the front door.

They're both carrying expensive-looking suitcases and groceries and are dressed impeccably in smart business clothes.

Neither of them look in Knox or Charlie's directions as they set their things down to take off their coats, and it's not until they get their coats hung up on the coat hanger that Mrs. Dalton looks over at Charlie and Knox, and the first thing that comes out of her mouth is: "Charles, your hair is getting too long. You need to cut it."

The weird sort of greeting makes Knox frown. He felt like Charlie's hair looked fine. In fact, it actually looked *better* than fine; the slightly longer hair made Charlie look really, really good, and while the shorter neater style he had it in made Charlie look more mature and put together, the longer hair was a better reflection of his personality.

Knox turns his head to chance a glance at Charlie, which only makes his frown grow as he watches Charlie's hand fly up self-consciously to grip at his bangs.

"Your mother has a point. If you grow out your hair any longer, you'll start looking queer."

The comment makes Knox blink in surprise and the weight of the words quickly settle in the room like a tidal wave and it makes Knox clench his jaw tightly.

Mr. Dalton's eyes then fall on Knox for the first time, as if just noticing his presence, and Knox instantly notices the scrutinizing look on his face as he gets glanced over. He looks displeased for a magnitude of reasons- the fact that Knox is a man most likely being the main one- but even if he wasn't, Knox has the sneaking suspicion he was going to be judgemental of whoever Charlie brought home no matter what. *Especially* since this was the first time Charlie was bringing anybody home.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Mr. Dalton then asks. "I always had a feeling your manners have been getting worse since going away for college and it's disappointing to see you're proving me right."

Charlie swallows roughly at the words and on instinct Knox blindly reaches out to grab Charlie's hand when sensing his discomfort.

Charlie quickly intertwines their fingers together and squeezes onto Knox's fingers, an all telling sign that he was stressed. Knox simply squeezes Charlie's fingers in return, his own silent way of telling him *I'm here. I'm going to be with you every step of the way.*

In an attempt to ease Charlie's nerves, Knox starts running his thumb in small circles over Charlie's skin and Mr. Dalton tracks the action with a displeased downturn of his lips that makes Charlie open and close his mouth a few times.

Somehow, he finally manages to get the words out on the third try.

"Mother, father, this is Knox Overstreet. . . my-my boyfriend," Charlie introduces, and his voice ends up cracking slightly as he gets out the word 'boyfriend.' It was so weird seeing Charlie so silent, so *meek* ; it was this completely different side of him Knox has never seen before, and it was only making him more and more pissed by the second knowing that his parents are the reason he's even acting like this hollowed-out shell of himself. Charlie gestures towards his parents with his free hand and Knox notices the slight tremor it has. "Knox, these are my parents: Brian and Everly Dalton."

"It's so nice to meet you, Brian and Everly," Knox says with a forced smile, stepping forward.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dalton would suffice," Charlie's mother says cooly, with such an air of distasteful energy that it makes Knox's blood boil and-

Fuck Charlie's parents. *Fuck Charlie's parents* . If Charlie thinks Knox is going to sit back idly while they mentally tear Charlie down at every opportunity they get, he has another thing fucking coming.

Knox's lips begin shaking from the effort of trying to maintain a polite smile, and he tries his hardest to push aside his annoyance as he holds his free hand out for Mrs. Dalton to shake.

She glances down at it for a few seconds with a purse of her lips before she slowly reaches out her hand to accept it, like she was contemplating whether or not it was actually worth shaking.

Again, *fuck Charlie's parents* .

"So," she says, and Knox can't for the fucking life of him figure out how someone could make a world sound so polite yet so condescending at the same time. Fuck, he'd rather talk to fucking Chet Danbury than endure this. "You're Charles' *roommate* ." Usually, the

people they were pretending to date in front of often joke around about the fact he and Charlie were roommates because of that Vine, but somehow Charlie's mom manages to make the fact that they live together sound sour, like it was something sacrilegious. "Were you dating before or after you decided to move in together?"

Clearly, the question was a test of some kind, one that Knox didn't know was coming or had even planned on studying.

"We didn't start dating until after we moved in, Mrs. Dalton," Knox finds himself saying. "I liked your son a while before we moved in together, but I was too scared to make a move since I didn't want to ruin our already pre-existing relationship. Especially since we were going to be living together, you know?" A voice in the back of Knox's mind was adamantly telling him to fucking *shut up* already, but his mouth filter was not listening, and he kept rambling on. "It took me a few weeks until I finally worked up the courage to ask him out and. . . " Knox gives a weak little shrug as he brings the little story to a close. "And the rest is history."

He can feel Charlie looking at him, but he's too terrified to gauge his reaction as this wasn't a part of their pre-planned talk. Not only that, but he was absolutely terrified Charlie was going to see the truth in the lie. So he keeps meeting the unreadable look Mrs. Dalton was giving him, instead. She squints her eyes as she looks up at him questionably, trying to detect whether or not he was lying and what feels like an eternity goes by before she finally nods her head.

"Alright, I was just making sure Charlie didn't lie to us about who he was moving in with," she says slowly. It doesn't exactly sound like she believes him in the end and as she drops Knox's hand and Knox thinks that this is really the best he can get out of her. "It wouldn't have been the first time he lied to us about something this important, you know."

And there it fucking was.

Knox waits for Mrs. Dalton to retract her hand before he reaches a hand out towards Mr. Dalton to try distracting himself from the agitation he was feeling. Mr. Dalton is quick to accept the handshake and Knox swears his hand is going to fucking fall off with the vice-like grip his hand was being shaken.

"Your handshake is flimsy, son," Mr. Dalton tells him, his eyes slightly squinting as he stares down at Knox in a way that makes him feel like

he's four feet instead of six. "I highly suggest you work on it before the rest of the family comes in tomorrow."

"Well, I didn't exactly want to accidentally break a finger or anything," Knox retorts coldly and flinches when he feels Charlie's fingernails dangerously digging into the palm of his hand. Quickly catching onto the mistake, he adds as politely as he could in an attempt to save face: "I went for polite."

"Polite handshakes show signs of *weakness* ," Mr. Dalton tells Knox firmly, limply dropping his grip on Knox's hand. He turns back around to pick up his briefcase off the floor and just as quickly as they had arrived, Charlie's parents make their way upstairs. They're at the top of the stairs when he hears Mr. Dalton add: "Now clean up the living room. You've made a mess in here, Charles."

Charlie flinches at the tone in his father's voice and quickly lets go of Knox's hand so he can hurry towards where their takeout boxes were still sitting on the coffee table. Knox quickly goes to follow him and the two of them fall into the silent rhythm of picking up all of the napkins and silverware they had left.

The living room wasn't even that messy. The whole entire rest of the room looked like nobody had been living in there for *months* , it was just that one section that set his parents off.

"I'm gonna go do dishes, you can go up to my room if you want," Charlie says, but his voice comes out as a whisper. He goes on to shoot what Knox is assuming is supposed to be a reassuring smile, but it's really everything *but* .

And that-and that alone- is what makes Knox say-

"No, I'll stay down here with you while you finish up. Keep you company."

Because there was no way in fucking *hell* Knox was going to leave Charlie in a room alone with the possible risk of his parents jumping on him without Knox being around to help defend him. He had a feeling they were going to be a lot worse if Knox wasn't around compared to how they were with him around, and he wants to try and do anything he can to try lessening the stress on Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie stares up at Knox, half helpless and half relieved.

"Okay," he murmurs, turning around to head towards the kitchen.

Belatedly, he adds: “Thank you, Knox.”

He doesn’t have a lot of dishes to do, just the forks and knives they were eating with and the glasses they were drinking Cola out of, but it takes him a while since his hands are violently shaking as he scrubs at the silverware. Knox stares at Charlie while he works with rapt attention, and for about the hundredth time this evening, Knox feels at a fucking loss.

He rushes for something- *anything* to say to try and make Charlie feel better but his thoughts get cut off when all of a sudden Charlie lets out a shuddery “ *fuck* ,” and he quickly extracts his hand from the water.

At first, Knox is confused, until he catches sight of blood rushing from the palm of one of Charlie’s hands.

Knox rushes towards him hurriedly, panic building up inside of him so fast that it was almost suffocating.

“Charlie, holy fuck, you’re bleeding, you’re-”

“Yeah, no fucking shit,” Charlie grits out through clenched teeth. He brings his hands close to his chest defensively, which begins staining the fabric of his sweatshirt. “Just- don’t worry about it, it’ll be fine.”

He turns away from Knox and starts heading towards the sink like he was about to *carry on doing dishes as if nothing happened* , and that’s enough to make Knox march towards Charlie and say, “Okay, no. We’re getting you cleaned up.” before he all but drags Charlie out of the kitchen.

It takes Knox a few minutes to locate the nearest bathroom- because even after living in Charlie’s house for a few days he still can’t figure out where fucking shit is- but when he finally finds it he ushers Charlie hurriedly into the room before closing the door behind him and locking it.

Charlie gives him a wide-eyed look and it’s only now that Knox realizes he probably looks fucking insane.

“Knox, I can-”

“Charlie, just let me take care of you,” Knox says sternly, with as much emotion as he can convey. “ *Please* .”

The words make Charlie’s shoulders sag, and it’s right here and now

that Knox realizes just how fucking *exhausted* he looks, just how draining being around his parents actually is for him.

It makes Knox feel guilty.

He knows that Charlie wouldn't have come clean about his family life since Neil had told Knox how long it had taken for Charlie to do the same with him, but Knox should've seen the warning signs; the offhanded comments he made about hating his childhood and his family, his complete disregard and often quickness to change the topic about his parents whenever they came up. He'd been too focused on his break up with Chris for the last few months, and before then he was just focused on Chris, in general, to have noticed something was wrong, when in that entire time and years prior to it, one of the closest people in his life had been hurting immensely.

But he was here now. And Goddammit, he was never going to make that sort of mistake again.

Dutifully, Charlie holds his hands up towards Knox, like he's a little kid who accidentally broke a vase while they were rough-housing inside, and Knox gently takes Charlie's hands in his so he can further inspect his wounds.

His right hand is completely fine, thank God, but his left-hand is what makes Knox feel a little worried; the cut on Charlie's left palm appears to be deep and is bleeding consistently, and while Knox gets a little blood on himself as he squints down at Charlie's hands, he pushes past it to look at his fingertips, which also have tiny little cuts on them.

"What's your diagnosis, Dr. Overstreet?" Charlie teases weakly.

"Well, Mr. Dalton," Knox says with mock-seriousness voice, humoring Charlie in whatever bit he was trying to distract himself with. "You got a pretty deep gash on your left palm, with some minor tiny cuts on your fingertips. But it's nothing good ol' Dr. Overstreet can't fix." Knox pauses a moment to flash a playful wink at Charlie and relishes in the way it makes Charlie laugh. "This next part is going to hurt like a bitch, though."

As he speaks, he slowly walks backward to lead Charlie towards the bathroom sink. He lets go of Charlie with one of his hands to turn on the water, frequently checking the temperature until it feels lukewarm, and when he's finally satisfied he slowly guides Charlie's hands underneath the water.

Charlie hisses sharply at the initial contact and goes to pull his hands back but Knox doesn't budge and forcefully keeps his hands under the running water, murmuring quiet words of encouragement as he begins massaging Charlie's hand.

He waits for a few seconds, staring as the red water goes down the drain, before he reaches out blindly to grab some soap, almost knocking the container off the counter in the process.

"Some doctor you are," Charlie grumbles with a snicker, but cuts himself with another hiss when Knox goes on to apply some soap onto the cut to disinfect it.

They fall into a compatible silence for a few more minutes as Knox continues cleaning the wound, turning Charlie's hand this way and that as he attempts to get at every angle of the cut possible. When the water finally stops running red Knox moves on to the smaller cuts. Although they're not nearly as bad as the one on Charlie's palm, Knox still gives them the same undivided attention, thumbing over each individual one for a minute at a time before going onto the next.

About ten minutes later Knox reaches to turn off the water and looks into the cabinet for some gauze to wrap the cut. He knows it might be a lost cause since gauze was a weird thing for people to keep in their homes, but then again, Charlie's parents were extremely anal and liked to keep things orderly, so it wouldn't be that much of a surprise if they kept ever first aid kit supply known to man in their cabinet.

Thankfully Knox's intuition was right, and he grabs the gauze with a sigh of relief, then the tiny little pair of scissors laying right next to it so he could cut off a giant piece to wrap Charlie's hand with.

"You should've gone to school to be a nurse," Charlie comments as Knox puts the gauze away.

Knox lets out a snicker.

"Shut up."

Charlie lets out a little laugh of his own as he leans his hip against the counter.

"I'm serious. You have good bedside manner."

As Knox closes the cabinet he smirks, and when he looks over at Charlie he sees that he's smirking, too.

“Well I hope so, my ma’s a nurse. Now hold out your hand for me, please.”

Charlie quickly rushes to do as he’s told and as Knox gently steadies Charlie’s hand, he notices the soft expression on his face.

“I never knew that about you,” he murmurs, and he sounds so genuinely *amazed* that it kind of makes Knox want to cry.

“She doesn’t make a lot of money or anything,” Knox quickly attempts to explain. “She’s just an LVN.”

“Still.”

Knox isn’t entirely sure how he’s supposed to respond to that without spilling his entire heart out on the floor, so he busies himself with wrapping the gauze around Charlie’s hand.
The two of them fall into another comfortable silence that only breaks when Knox finishes and Charlie mumbles a quiet yet soft ‘Thank you, Knox,’ and then the silence draws out between them as they begin to clean up the blood splatter equivalent of a breadcrumb trail Charlie accidentally left leading to the bathroom, as well as the rest of the kitchen and living room.

Knox ends up doing most of the work, but it takes him less than five minutes and he’s not really that upset to be doing it in the first place, and once the two of them make sure everything is as pristine as they could possibly make it, they slowly creep up the stairs to the third floor towards Charlie’s room.

All of the other lights in the house are off, suggesting that Charlie’s parents went right to sleep right after Knox had met them, but Knox still keeps his guard up as he makes his way after Charlie down the hall.

It’s not until Knox closes Charlie’s bedroom door behind him when Knox feels comfortable enough to look at Charlie and ask: “Are you going to tell me what that was about?”

Charlie finally glances up from where his eyes had been glued to his feet and upon doing so, his eyebrows draw together in confusion.

“Well, I think you saw what happened to my hand.”

“No, I’m not talking about your hand. I’m talking about your *parents* ,” Knox stresses and Charlie immediately tenses. “Charlie, they’re

fucking *awful* ."

Charlie lets out a long sigh.

"Tell me something I don't know," he grumbles. He walks over to flick on the nightstand light and after doing so he fixes Knox with an unreadable look. "Can we not talk about my parents right now?"

As much as Knox wants to give in to Charlie's request, he can't.

"Charlie, you know I can't do that. Especially after I've seen the way they treat you."

Charlie averts eye contact, lets out another sigh.

"Knox, can you drop it? Please?"

Knox's jaw fucking *drops* at the indifference in his voice.

" *Drop it?* " he echoes. "They- they treat you like fucking *shit* , Charlie, how do you expect me to fucking *drop it* -"

"If you don't drop it it's going to make things worse, alright?" Charlie pauses for a moment and Knox thinks Charlie's getting ready to start an argument, he's practically gearing himself up for one himself, but that's not what ends up happening. Charlie instead opens his mouth and closes it a few times before he continues on, obviously trying to restrain his frustration but also attempting to not start up something, either. "Look, I-I get they're fucking shitty people, okay? I didn't say that I didn't want you coming here for shits and giggles. But if you keep making comments like the fucking finger breaking one you made to my father in front of everyone, it's not gonna-"

"So you're just expecting me to *do nothing?"* Knox asks, incredulous. "You expect for me to just stand idly while they-"

"Knox *please* ," Charlie practically begs, and the desperation in his voice makes Knox shut up instantaneously. "Just- drop it. Let's just focus on getting through the rest of Thanksgiving break and *then* you can vent about how shitty my parents are. Maybe even tell them off as we're walking out the door. Alright?"

He fixes Knox with a hard look Knox is quick to return and they go on in this standstill for a few seconds before Knox finally utters out a gritted, "Alright."

And deep down, he is aware Charlie knows he's lying.

But Charlie doesn't make any further comment on it, he just gathers up a white nightshirt and flannel pajama pants before heading off towards the adjoining bathroom to change, mumbling a quiet, "Sorry I ruined your shirt." as he goes.

Knox blinks at the closing bathroom door a few times before finally looking down at the shirt in question and sure enough- Charlie had managed to get blood on it.

Knox doesn't mind, though. He doesn't mind one bit. He'd ruin all his clothes just to make sure Charlie Dalton was okay, and as Knox slips off the forever ruined Beach Boys shirt to change into his flannel pajama pants, he knows he wouldn't be able to say that out loud, because if he did he would probably scare Charlie off.

As soon as they get changed they pretty much go straight to bed, not being able to take the awkwardness that has settled over them any longer.

Or at least Charlie goes straight to bed. Knox has been staring up at the ceiling for the greater part of the past two hours and cannot go to sleep for the fucking *life of him*.

His mind is practically reeling a million miles a second, thinking and overthinking the events of the past day, as well as every possible thing that could happen at the thanksgiving dinner that's going to take place in less than twelve hours. The main things he's preoccupied about is how Charlie is going to come out during all of this and if the rest of his family treats him the same way his parents do.

Even if the rest of his family are the equivalent of saints compared to his parents, Knox still worries; he just wants the best for him, wants someone outside of Knox and the rest of the Dead Poets to unconditionally love him just as much as they do, and it's that desire that quickly fills Knox with the need to get up off of the couch he's lying on and to go crawl in bed next to Charlie and hold him close.

He knows the idea's a stupid one; if he just went over and crawled into bed next to Charlie, chances were he'd get socked over the fucking face because Charlie would think Knox is an intruder of some kind. He also doesn't know how he would even *explain* to Charlie why he just randomly got up in the middle of the night to sleep in a bed and cuddle with him. So-

So just ask him , the illogical part of his brain tells him. *He might be awake. Just go for it . Carpe Diem, or however the quote Neil's obsessed with goes.*

And before the more logical half of Knox's brain could even think it over, and before he can shove the words down his throat and leave them there to die, Knox blurts out:

"Charlie, can I sleep with you?"

It was a stupid thing to say; Charlie's asleep on his bed, and as soon as the words get out Knox realizes how out of context it just sounds like he's asking for sex and *not* for him to sleep in the same bed next to him.

It's a good thing Charlie was asleep.

Or so Knox thought.
Because one moment, Charlie appeared to be passed the fuck out, and then the next moment he starts shifting around in his bed to sit up against the pillows resting against the headboard. Him waking up was already bad enough, but all gets worse when in a groggy, sleep-induced voice, Charlie asks: "Knoxious, are you trying to proposition sex at two in the morning?" and Knox wants to die on the fucking spot, because-

Because, okay, Knox has thought about having sex with Charlie. *A lot* . A lot more than he *should* be thinking about having sex with his best friend and his roommate. It was something Knox wasn't particularly proud of considering he lived with the fucking guy, but was something he quickly accepted was going to plague his day-to-day thoughts after waking up from having an explicit wet dream about a week or so after realizing his feelings.

That fucking *dream* - as well as Charlie in general- quickly made it to the top of Knox's spank bank material in the aftermath of said dream, and he quickly shoves these thoughts in his metaphorical skeleton closet in the hopes that they would never see the fucking light of day again.

He knows Charlie's messing around; Charlie always messes around by making lewd jokes, but he's never really made lewd jokes implying *the two of them* doing anything remotely sexual together, and not only was Knox starting to lose his fucking mind because of it, he also felt as if his metaphorical closet of skeletons were coming to the forefront of his mind in a glaringly obvious *fuck you* .

“Holy fuck, you are!” Charlie suddenly exclaims loudly, and it’s at that moment Knox comes to the realization he took too long to respond.

“No- I’m not!” Knox rushes to explain and he feels his face flushing a dark crimson. It doesn’t matter if the lights are turned off in the room, his face was so fucking red right now Charlie was probably seeing it from his bed like a glaring beacon. “I-I worded that question wrong-”

“Sure you did-”

“I did! I’m serious, Dalton-”

“I knew you just wanted me for my body, Overstreet, I’m so hurt-”

“Okay, I’ll rephrase: *Can I sleep in your bed next to you without propositioning sex because I think I saw a fucking spider over here and I’m creeped the fuck out* .”

Charlie falls silent, processing Knox’s lie.

“You. . . think there’s a spider on the couch.”

And *fuck* , Knox was really talking himself into a corner right now, but just the mere proposition of getting to sleep next to Charlie made him go on, because *go big or go home* , right?

“Yes, Dalton, there is, and I swear to god it looks like Shelob and Aragog had a fucking mutant child that’s double the size of both of them.”

Another pause.

“Well, I can’t have you getting taken away to these spiders' evil lair now, can I?” Charlie suddenly says and it fills Knox up with a childish sense of hope. “Get over here.”

And yes. *Yes* .

Knox scrambles off of the couch a little faster than he knows he should’ve, which is something Charlie makes apparent based on the way he’s laughing at him but Knox can’t find it in himself to care as he all but runs to the bed, his phone and his AirPods in hand.

He’s at the edge of his side of the bed when Charlie’s eyes suddenly dip down to the socks Knox hasn’t taken off yet, and with an almost aghast expression on his face, says,

“I don’t know how else to say it, Knoxious, but if you sleep with your socks on, you’re a freak and I’m making you sleep on the couch, I don’t care if the spiders fucking get you.”

Knox lets out a loud giggle that he’s quick to smother, and once doing so he realizes Charlie’s parents most likely wouldn’t have heard him due to being on the other side of the house a floor up from them.

He’s quick to toe out of his socks, throwing them carelessly in random directions in the dark encased bedroom, pushing it off finding his socks as a ‘tomorrow morning’ sort of problem.

“Scoot over, asshole,” Knox whispers fiercely as he lifts up the covers and crawls underneath them and with a laugh Charlie obeys.

The first thing he realizes after fully getting comfortable on his back is that Charlie is less than six inches away from him on the full-size bed and yet his body heat was practically setting Knox’s soul on fire despite the distance. The second was that-

“Holy fuck, this is the most comfortable bed I’ve ever fucking laid in.”

Out of his periphery, Knox can see that Charlie is also laying down on his back but is turning his head a little so he can stare at Knox. Knox mirrors the action to find Charlie is smiling at him in a lazy sort of amusement.

“It’s the 600 thread count sheets,” Charlie informs and the revelation makes Knox groan over exaggeratedly, which makes Charlie let out another laugh.

They fall into another silence, simply staring at each other for what feels like a lifetime, and Knox is about to put in his AirPods and listen to his sleep playlist and turn his back on Charlie when he suddenly speaks.

“Hey, Knox?” Charlie asks, and his voice sounds so damn childlike and terrified that it brings Knox to attention immediately.

“Yeah?”

“Could- do you think you can come closer?”

And Knox’s fucking heart stops.

Charlie . . . Charlie was making it sound like he wanted to cuddle with

him.

Yeah, they had their thing when they would cuddle on the couch together, but that was something the two of them never spoke about or asked to do in advance. Charlie was *outwardly* asking for him to move closer, and he has to smother all the childish excitement that was threatening to explode out of his chest.

Don't mess this up, idiot .

"Of course," is what Knox says, a lot calmer and collected than he was feeling. "Yeah."

The bed dips as he slowly scoots his way over to Charlie and when Charlie is less than two inches away from him Knox tucks an arm underneath his side and brings him into his chest, and almost startles when he realizes that Charlie wasn't wearing a shirt.

Charlie goes along with a soft sigh that makes Knox feel like he's been punched in the gut, and that feeling only intensifies tenfold when Charlie tucks his head into the crook of Knox's neck and fists a handful of the white t-shirt Knox has on.

Laying this close to him, Knox is able to really smell Charlie; a weird combination of his cologne, coconut shampoo, and something else that Knox could only describe as simply masculine and just *Charlie* and the sensory overload all of this was causing him was making him feel like he was floating.

With his free hand, Knox blindly reaches out for his phone to turn it on, which earns him a displeased sound from Charlie.

"Put the phone away, it's brighter than fuck," he grumbles, and Knox feels the reverberations of his voice in his sternum and can feel the brush of his lips against his pec.

Knox cracks a tiny smile. "I'm getting my sleep playlist queued up, hang on a sec," he tells him. "Do you want an airpod?"

"I usually fall asleep listening to your music, anyway, so sure, why not," Charlie grumbles.

Knox rolls his eyes, purposely ignoring the jab at his music taste.

"Do you want the left or the right one?"

“Doesn’t really matter,” Charlie hums back in reply, so Knox gives him the left airpod so he doesn’t have to lift his head up from Knox’s chest.

After Knox puts his airpod in he turns on his playlist and tosses his phone a few inches away from him, along with the airpod case.

John Lennon’s *Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)* is the first song to come on his shuffle. The song has always managed to make him feel at peace in the past while trying to fall asleep due to the sound of ringing bells and waves crashing in the intro, but there was something about him being able to lay here and hold *Charlie* - who Knox considers to be all kinds of beautiful- while the song plays that makes him feel content.

Knox slowly wraps his other arm across Charlie’s chest, reveling in the goosebumps his arms leave in their wake, and in return, Charlie further burrows his head into Knox’s neck.

“Goodnight, Charlie,” Knox whispers and it takes all of the restraint in his body to not bend down and kiss him.

“Goodnight, Knox,” Charlie echoes and closes his eyes, and Knox silently wonders if Charlie is having the exact same dilemma as him.

About halfway through the next song on his shuffle- *Dedicated To the One I Love* by The Mamas and Papas- Knox is almost positive Charlie has fallen asleep, but then Charlie’s legs move to intertwine their legs together. At first, Knox startles at the contact but when realizing what going on, his muscles relax and he practically feels himself sinking into it.

Feeling completely and utterly exhausted from the day’s events, but also nervous and excited by having Charlie in his arms, Knox’s eyelids finally feel heavy enough to the point where he can close them, and he manages to fall asleep not too long after that.

So Let It Out & Let It In

Chapter Summary

So much fucking shit happens in this chapter, I don't even know how to properly summarize.

Chapter Notes

Oh my god.

This update came out way later than I have ever anticipated it would, mainly given the fact that this chapter was so long and there was so much to compress into this one chapter. But finally, after a month of working on it and over sixteen thousand words written for the cause, chapter twelve is finally out in the world!

As always, HUGE shout out to my beta @auxctor for helping me out with this chapter, because without his help, I would've gone insane on at least five separate occasions while writing this chapter. (I'm not even kidding, I practically have a straight jacket with my name on it after pulling countless all-nighters trying to get this thing done).

Thank you all so much for being patient while I wrote this chapter, and I hope that it was worth the wait? ;)

The following morning when Knox wakes up, he's both surprised and immensely disappointed when he comes to the realization that he's alone in Charlie's bed.

In his sleep-induced daze, Knox reaches blindly towards his phone- which had managed to get lost in the sea of sheets at some point in the middle of the night- and after his phone screen lights up and he dismisses the low battery notification, he discovers that it's only 9:15 and that Charlie sent him a text twenty minutes ago saying that he took Knox's car to the store to pick up something his mother forgot when his parents went out shopping the night before.

The text makes him a tiny bit anxious, as Charlie is currently out and about in Cape Cod somewhere with his car and was most likely driving as recklessly as he was when they were coming into town a few days ago, but it's something Knox tries his hardest to push out of his head as he gets out of bed and stretches his limbs again.

He heads to the bathroom to brush his teeth and after finally mustering the courage to venture downstairs, he finds Charlie's mother is in the kitchen starting to do the prepping for Thanksgiving dinner.

She's got on a crisp white apron tightly wrapped around herself as she chops vegetables with the kind of precision that would give a heart surgeon a run for their money, and despite the fact that she has the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade playing on the living room television while she cooks there's a deep frown on her face, like all of the cartoon blimps that were making their way down 59th Street were personally offending her.

Knox doesn't know if it's because he was too hung up on making a good first impression or if it was because he was so appalled by the way Charlie's mother had treated Charlie last night, but as Knox hesitantly makes his way into the kitchen, he can really see just how much Charlie actually looks like his mother; they have the same nose, the same warm brown eyes. If she smiled, it would most likely possess the same mischievous manner that Charlie's often did.

It was absolutely bizarre to him how two people who have such striking similarities can have such clashing personalities.

"Good morning," Knox greets and Mrs. Dalton tears her eyes away from the television screen to fix Knox with a look that clearly displays her state of stupefaction upon seeing him wandering into the kitchen. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Mrs. Dalton doesn't say anything at first, choosing instead to blink at Knox as if she witnessed him grow three extra heads, until she eventually echoes back a weak sounding, "Happy Thanksgiving, Mr. Overstreet," as she walks over to one of the many pans she had on the stove, sliding the celery she was chopping into one of the pans before she goes on to chop an onion for what Knox was assuming was going to be the stuffing.

He watches as she continues to move around the kitchen, painfully being reminded of the fact that a few states over in Connecticut, his mother was most likely doing the exact same thing in their more humble-looking kitchen.

God, what he'd *kill* for him and Charlie to be spending Thanksgiving with his family right now.

It wasn't truly until arriving here that Knox realizes just how *much*

he's missed his family and getting to see them and rant to them in person about how his time at school was going. Being stuck in a house that was far too big with parents who were hurting their son in more ways than they could even possibly imagine only made Knox's longing grow astronomically.

He attempts to distract himself by making his way around the island towards the ridiculously high tech coffee machine Charlie's parents had next to one of the sinks in their kitchen, and after a few minutes of fiddling with it, he finally manages to get the damn thing to work, feeling incredibly proud of himself as he watches the coffee cup he grabbed from the cupboard fill.

It turned out having Charlie practically fight Knox when showing him how to work the coffee wasn't an effort that was entirely in vain, after all.

The coffee isn't finished brewing for a full minute before he's already reaching out and taking a sip. He winces a little bit at how hot the coffee still was but appreciating the fact the sharp pain was giving himself something else to focus on other than his nerves, and he turns to Mrs. Dalton.

"Do you need help with anything?" he asks, leaning up against the island.

The question makes Mrs. Dalton almost drop the knife she's cutting with and she snaps her head up to stare at him, and if Knox thought she was surprised when he came downstairs, it was nothing compared to the way she was looking at him right now.

When she doesn't immediately say anything, Knox is terrified he somehow said the wrong thing.

"I-my sister and I usually help my mother with thanksgiving dinner every year," he explains hurriedly in an attempt to save face. "It's sort of a family thing and I like to cook, I-"

"I would greatly appreciate the help, Mr. Overstreet, thank you," Mrs. Dalton cuts him off with a remnant of a small smile. She sounds weirdly gentle and that coupled with the genuine sounding quality her voice takes on makes Knox feel weird, like he was seeing a side of Charlie's mother that Charlie himself never even got to see. "If you go wash your hands, you can chop some of these vegetables for me and help me make the pumpkin pie."

Knox does as he's told, going over to the kitchen sink to wash his hands as fast as he possibly could before grabbing one of the spare knives

They work in silence for a few minutes as they chop vegetables side by side and it's not until Knox is almost done with cubing the yams that Mrs. Dalton breaks the silence.

"You're the first person Charles has ever brought home," she says, looking up from the potatoes she was chopping to fix Knox with an unreadable look. "His father and I weren't expecting him to bring anyone home any time soon, as he's. . . always been a lot to put up with."

And just like that, the light, sort of peaceful silence that has fallen over the kitchen is completely demolished.

Knox purses his lips tightly. He should've known it would only be a matter of time before Charlie came up in conversation.

"And what is that supposed to mean?' he asks, trying his hardest to keep his voice level.

Mrs. Dalton does a little shrug with her shoulders as she continues chopping away, seemingly unfazed.

"Well, Charles has always been rather..." she trails off as she looks for the right word. " *Much.* He can be rather exhausting and his father and I never expected him to bring anyone else home until he- *matured* a bit more."

"And he's not mature now?"

Knox doesn't even know *why* he's doing this to himself at this point, because he knows he's going to get some kind of negative response from Charlie's mother, yet he still finds himself keeping the conversation going, anyway. It's like he's watching a car accident in slow motion and can't exactly turn his eyes away no matter how much he's yelling at himself internally to knock it the fuck off.

The question catches Mrs. Dalton off guard, as though she can't understand why Knox could possibly think Charlie is mature in the slightest.

"Charles still has quite a lot of growing up to do. He's still the same loud, attention-seeking person he was as a child."

The comment makes Knox grind his teeth so tightly together he's surprised they don't break. Mrs. Dalton, however, doesn't appear to notice Knox's anger because for some reason she *continues fucking talking.*

"I just don't understand for the life of me how you put up with him and his incessant *nonsense* on a day to day business. It's a miracle I put up with it as long as I have. If he would've lived with his father and I another year I think we might have kicked him out."

All of this is said with a laugh, but Knox knows for certain they both know she's being dead serious right now.

"Well, I think Charlie has a harder time putting up with me, if I'm being completely honest," Knox replies with a forced laugh of his own and narrowly misses cutting himself with the knife he's using.

"I find that hard to believe," Mrs. Dalton mutters, and she says it so quietly and with so much malice in her voice that Knox is positive he had to have misheard her at first. Nobody's mother should talk like this about their own *child.* "You seem like a young, respectable man, even if your preferences are a little . . . misguided."

The backhanded compliment hits Knox like a sucker-punch to the face.

"I'm assuming you're referring to my sexuality?" Knox asks, his voice coming out eerily quiet.

The question makes Mrs. Dalton look at Knox for the first time since the entire conversation started, a taken aback expression crossing her face as she stares at Knox that he would've felt guilty about putting there if it wasn't for the excessive amounts of annoyance that were being brought to the surface. As quick as the look appears on her face, it fades away into one of mild irritation that Knox is almost certain is showing on his own face.

"I have no idea why you're getting so defensive with me right now, Mr. Overstreet," Mrs. Dalton says, in a *you said it and not me* kind of way. "I'm just confused as to why you're putting up such an effort in defending Charles for his naive and reckless behavior when it's apparent that he still needs some growing up to do."

Knox snaps, finally believing that he's heard enough.

"What can I say?" Knox says sharply, the words tumbling out of his

mouth without him realizing. “I’m in love.”

Mrs. Dalton looks absolutely scandalized, as if the possibility of anybody loving her son was a ludicrous thought, and Knox feels pissed to no end about it.

“You don’t actually mean that, do you?” she asks with a calculated raise of her eyebrow when she regains her composure, hardly masking the disapproval from her voice. “Three months is a little too early to really know if you are in love with a person. You don’t have a clear understanding of their character yet.”

Knox thinks back on the last few weeks of his life. Yeah, he’s only had these feelings for Charlie for about a month at this point, but he’s known Charlie for way longer than that. He knows that Charlie is charismatic and cocky but also incredibly humble and secretly has a deeper appreciation for the people around him than he likes to let on. That he drinks his coffee black with none of that ‘processed, sugary shit.’ How Charlie has a great passion for English because of a teacher he had his senior year at Welton, but doesn’t tell anyone that he loves Shakespeare sonnets because he’s scared that he’ll get made fun of. That Charlie’s favorite color is the same as Knox’s (red) and how he only eats mac and cheese with a spoon.

It’s knowing all these little things about Charlie; his quirks and the small little mannerisms he does that Knox has finally begun noticing for the first time since moving in with him, that makes him respond without hesitating.

“Yes,” he says firmly and it’s so weird Charlie’s mother of all people is the first person he admits his love to while sober. “I’m positive.”

Mrs. Dalton opens her mouth- most likely to try and rebuttal Knox’s statement- but thankfully Knox gets saved by the sound of the front door opening.

A few moments later Charlie comes walking into the kitchen in Knox’s Beatles *Help!* sweatshirt, carrying a few plastic bags of groceries around his wrists. If he’s surprised to see Knox is awake and is helping his mother in the kitchen he doesn’t outwardly show it, as he fixes Knox with a little smile when they make eye contact.

“Morning, Knoxious,” Charlie greets, and something about the way he says the words makes Knox’s heart warm similarly to the way it does when he drinks alcohol.

“Morning,” Knox echoes with a saccharine smile to match and in his state of bubbly, unbridled happiness at Charlie’s arrival, he leans over the island counter to give Charlie a kiss on the cheek.

He feels Charlie tense up underneath his touch and reaches a hand up to Knox’s shoulder to push him away. Panicked, Knox thinks for a second that he overstepped with Charlie and that kissing him might’ve been overdoing it, but it’s not until he follows Charlie’s line of vision and notices the stiffness that Mrs. Dalton’s shoulders take on as she stares at the two of them that he realizes the error he made. He desperately wants to retract the kiss, but that’s something he now realizes is out there.

Charlie clears his throat awkwardly and takes a few steps away from Knox in an attempt to dissipate some of the growing tension, holding up the bag of groceries towards his mother with a less genuine smile than the one Knox had been on the receiving end of. This one looked a lot more scared and just a tiny bit yearning, as if he wanted the recognition for doing such a small task and it was something that was absolutely heartbreaking to witness.

Mrs. Dalton doesn’t glance up at Charlie as she takes one of the plastic bags and peers into it to look at the contents, her face taking on something almost expressionless.

“You got me the wrong brand of Cranberry sauce.”

Charlie frowns.

“I thought you said to get Ocean Spray-” he attempts to explain.

“I *said* to get Shop Rite,” his mother cuts him off tersely. “I would’ve just sent your *boyfriend* to the store if I knew you weren’t going to be able to follow a simple direction.”

The obvious jab and being brought up in conversation only as a tool to slap Charlie in the face for his mistake was something that made Knox incredibly uncomfortable and when the heat of Charlie’s gaze falls on him, Knox lowers his eyes down towards the cutting board awkwardly, not really certain as to what he was supposed to do in this situation.

Charlie murmurs something quietly that to Knox sounds like an apology before he turns and makes his way towards the sink.

Mrs. Dalton studies him for a few seconds, her frown growing a little

deeper.

“I never knew you liked The Beatles, Charles,” she notes, which makes Charlie halt all his movements for a second.

“Knox loves The Beatles. He listens to them all the time,” Charlie responds as he rolls up the sleeves of the sweatshirt so he can wash his hands. Knox notes that the bandages he wrapped around Charlie’s left-hand last night were gone and that he had to have taken it off sometime this morning. “Their music is starting to grow on me a little bit.”

Knox can tell Charlie is trying to come across as indifferent, but there’s something fond in the way that he says the words that makes Knox’s heart rate pick up a little bit in his chest. He’s always felt like his music taste was one of the main things Charlie often gave him shit about, so hearing him talk about it like was one of the greatest things about his personality made him feel electric.

Mrs. Dalton nods her head at that, looking slightly pleased.

“Well, their music is a major improvement from all the loud, meaningless rap that you typically listen to,” she tells him, which makes Charlie let out a half-hearted hum of agreement.

He comes over to lean against the island so he can watch Knox while he cooks. Knox raises his eyebrow at Charlie in silent question the second his mother turns away from the two of them, but all Charlie does is give Knox a smile that looks to be on the lines of a grimace and doesn’t give Knox much of an elaboration.

So they were back to square one, then.

Knox looks away from Charlie with a soft sigh, grips the knife a little tighter in his hands, and presumes what he was doing.

The hours drag by at an almost agonizingly slow pace.

After the almost insufferably awkward conversation Charlie and his mother had, Charlie began helping Knox in his efforts in helping prep Thanksgiving dinner. While neither he nor Knox said anything outright towards each other as Charlie’s mother was purposely trying to eavesdrop on the few conversations they did have, their elbows occasionally bump as they worked and Knox almost dropped his knife in surprise every time at the contact in a way that would make Charlie

send Knox these almost knowing glances, as if he knew what he was doing and was trying to silently antagonize Knox on purpose.

They manage to finish helping Charlie's mom at around 1:30 and when noticing the abundance of nervous energy Charlie begins possessing after his father wakes up, Knox attempts to try distracting him by suggesting that they resume his piano lessons.

Charlie is noticeably relieved at the suggestion and leaps at the opportunity to grab Knox's hand and leave the kitchen to head over to the piano. He's noticeably less confident than he had been a few days prior as he stumbles through his explanations on the differences between sharp and minor keys, a side effect of his father staring at the two of them with the most scrutinizing expression Knox has ever seen, but he feels like the lesson is going well considering the circumstances, and feels a tiny bit accomplished that he walked away from their lesson today knowing the left-hand part for heart and soul, even if he felt like him and Charlie were like Tom Hanks and Robert Loggia in that scene from *Big*.

The lesson gets cut short after they successfully manage to run through the song without Knox bumping his hand into Charlie's elbow when Mr. Dalton comes into the living room and yells at the two of them for messing around when they should've been getting ready, practically sentencing them to Charlie's room to get ready for the dinner like a couple of exiles.

"It's only three," Charlie mutters to Knox as they make their way upstairs, voicing the annoyance he would never have the courage to say in front of his parents. "The rest of my family isn't even going to be here until five, and we don't even eat dinner until six."

"Why so late?" Knox asks curiously, falling into step. "My family typically eats around two."

"It's because they feel like if we eat earlier it wouldn't be classified as a 'dinner'," Charlie scoffs with an annoyed roll of his eyes. "I just wished they would have it earlier just so we can get this fucking thing over with."

Knox lets out a snort of agreement.

When they walk into Charlie's room, Knox insists Charlie takes the first shower so he can call his mother and wish his family a happy Thanksgiving while he dug around in his duffle bag so he could find the suit he brought with him that Charlie had made fun of him for

bringing as he thought it would make Knox look like one of the Blues Brothers.

As she usually was whenever Knox called, his mother was absolutely ecstatic to hear from him; asking how he was doing and if he made it to Cape Cod safe and if anything interesting happened on their trip so far.

Knox answers the questions as enthusiastically as he could so he doesn't worry her, but it's clear his mother can see through his facade because she asks, "Knox, is everything okay?" in such a gentle voice it makes all the fight leave him.

"Not really," Knox sighs, looking out Charlie's window. The sky is still the same dark shade of gray it had been when Knox had woken up this morning, except now the wind was beginning to pick up and the waves began crashing viciously against the shore. He wasn't certain if it was going to rain or if it was going to snow, but whatever was coming wasn't going to be good.

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" his mother then asks, which breaks Knox from his train of thought.

He swallows, not entirely sure where to begin.

"It's his parents," he finally says.

"Are they giving you a hard time?" his mother immediately asks, in such a defensive way that Knox can envision the terrifying frown on her face. "Because if they are giving you a hard time, Knox, I will drive over to Massachusettes myself to give them a piece of my mind."

The threat makes Knox laugh a tiny bit.

"No, that's not necessary," he tells her. When his laughter dies down he continues. "His parents are indifferent towards me; it's Charlie who they don't treat very well."

"Oh, honey," Knox's mother sighs empathetically, clearly at a loss for words.

"I just- mom, they treat him so horribly," Knox goes on, shifting his weight on his legs as he talks. "The way they speak to him and talk about him is just- it's so devastating. I've tried to stand up for him yesterday but Charlie got mad and told me not to do anything too

drastic during this entire trip, which is difficult because I really think that I'm in love with him. This isn't- this isn't close to how things were with Chris. I never had feelings like this with her, and I think that is just making this entire thing even *worse* ."

While Knox continues to rant his mother just quietly listens, allowing Knox to let out everything that's been eating him from the inside out these past few days until he runs out of breath.

"Well," his mother begins when Knox is finished. "I feel like you're good for him, Knox."

"Because we're both incredibly stubborn?" Knox jokes weakly.

"Because you can show him what's like to genuinely be loved by someone."

The remark shocks Knox, nearly taking his breath away, and he has to swallow the giant lump that forms in his throat.

His mother quickly changes the subject for a while before passing her phone around so he can talk to his sister and father and some of his other distant family for a while until she takes back the phone and continues talking to him.

It's just when Knox is about to hang up the call that Charlie comes out of the bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, making Knox just about have a fucking heart attack.

He feels himself grow uncomfortably hot, practically flushing to the roots of his hair and he has to fight the urge to not trace the path the waterdrops from Charlie's hair make down his exposed skin like some kind of fucking pervert.

"- Knox, are you even listening to what I'm saying right now?" his mother asks.

Knox clears his throat, tearing his eyes away from Charlie, who had looked up from where he was messing around in his duffle bag to raise his eyebrows in confusion.

"Yeah I am, sorry," he quickly apologizes, still feeling the warm heat of Charlie's gaze on him. "Listen, can I call you back later? I have to get ready for dinner now."

"Of course, honey. I love you," his mother says softly.

“Love you,” Knox echoes weakly, hanging up his phone and tossing it on the couch.

No sooner did the phone hit the gray couch that Knox rushes to gather up all of his clothes and the container of Crew hair gel that he had brought with him before he practically sprints towards the bathroom without giving Charlie any sort of explanation.

Knox stays in the shower a little longer than he should’ve, allowing for the hot water to soothe his aching muscles and the steam to cloud the bathroom, scrubbing shampoo into his scalp until his fingers feel numb and his scalp is tingling.

At one point he contemplates whether or not he should let the hot water suffocate him so he doesn’t have to meet the rest of Charlie’s family, but he ends up opting against the idea, even if he’s on the brink of it.

He gets out of the shower and quickly gets dressed in the white button-up and tux. As he stares at his reflection in the mirror, he comes to the miserable realization that Charlie was right: Knox did in fact look like a Blues Brother with the tux he had on.

Seriously, fuck his life.

Feeling far less confident than he had been while packing, Knox unscrews the hair gel and quickly jumps into the daunting task of trying to style his hair, messing with his hair until it’s meticulous and his bangs aren’t plastered to his forehead.

It’s only when he’s finished that he realizes he can no longer push off the inevitable and grabs the black tie he still has laying on the counter by the sink.

Despite it being considered one of the ‘righteous passages of a man’ by Cameron, Knox never learned how to properly tie a tie. Similar to how Knox has done everything in life with the exception of cooking, tying a tie was something he was incredibly clumsy at and failed miserably with so his parents knowing this would always take pity on him and tie it for him.

Except now his parents weren’t here and Knox had to tie the damn thing himself.

Taking a deep breath he wraps the tie around himself, trying to mimic the way his father and mother have attempted to show him, but to no

avail, it doesn't work.

Huffing, he unwraps the tie and repositions it before going through with the same motions.

Again, he wasn't successful.

He tries and tries, only to be met with the same disastrous results his first attempt provided.

After what has to have been his fiftieth attempt at trying to tie his tie, Knox is ready to flush the fucking thing down the toilet. The only thing stopping him from going through with his efforts is when he hears an amused but gentle sounding, "You need my help with that Overstreet or what?" come from behind him.

Knox turns to see his savior leaning up against the doorframe of the bathroom, clad in a thick white turtleneck sweater and brown plaid trousers that are cuffed at the ankles, looking like something straight out of Knox's dreams.

As much as Knox wants to vehemently deny Charlie's offer to help, God knows he needs it at this point, so instead of putting up an argument or offering up a sarcastic remark about how he can do it himself, Knox holds out the black-tie towards Charlie in an act of defeat.

Charlie makes his way towards him, his lips curling in amusement and his eyes practically sparkling.

"My, my, Knox, what would Mary Overstreet say?" he ponders in faux-exasperation, shaking his head.

"She would yell at me for not getting her sooner," Knox confesses, and is pleased when Charlie lets out a loud, bubbly sounding laugh.

"You *seriously* need to learn how to do this by yourself," he tells Knox, although there's no real heat behind the words. "She's not gonna be around to tie your ties for you forever, you know."

"Well, I got you, don't I?" Knox manages weakly.

Charlie's lips part at the words and an expression Knox couldn't quite read comes across his face.

"I guess you do, huh?" he responds with a slight laugh, his voice

barely above a whisper.

With deft fingers, Charlie works the tie around Knox's neck and ties it for him. He has to get up on his tiptoes a tiny bit so he can truly work his magic, but he manages to get the job done, nonetheless, and the joke Knox has about Charlie's height gets stuck in his throat as he realizes just how close Charlie was standing to him.

If Charlie is fazed by their proximity he doesn't outwardly show it and before Knox knows it Charlie is finished and is stepping away to look at his handiwork.

"There you go," Charlie murmurs, looking up at Knox with a little satisfied smirk on his face. "God damn, my boyfriend has never looked so good."

Knox has to swallow the lump in his throat at the dumb nickname and all the possibilities it implies but he never gets to ask about it as Charlie is stepping away from him and heading back into his room. Knox trails behind him helplessly and as soon as Charlie fits a watch around his wrist, they head downstairs.

Both Charlie's parents are in the dining room doing final preparations to the table, setting out expensive, gold looking plates and cutlery at each of the chairs that were going to be occupied by people in less than a half an hour.

Most likely hearing the two of them come downstairs, both Charlie's parents look up. The second his eyes land on Knox and Charlie, a reproachful look comes across Mr. Dalton's face. At first, Knox thinks it's merely because of the fact Knox has an arm wrapped loosely around Charlie's waist as they walk towards the dining room.

As it turns out, their close proximity was not the issue.

"Charles, you need to get changed right this instant."

Charlie's eyes widen in surprise.

" *What* ?" Charlie takes a sharp glance down at his outfit and then looks back up at his father, his expression a mixture of confusion and hurt. "Why?"

"The outfit is *effeminate* ," his father spits, which makes Charlie tense up. "No son of mine is going to be dressed like that in front of the rest of our family, do you understand?"

“I-” Charlie starts and when catching the almost lethal-looking glare his father is sending him he stops short. “Yes, sir.”

Knox goes to reach out an arm to stop Charlie, to reassure him that he looks fine and that he should be allowed to wear whatever the hell he wanted because he was an adult, but Charlie retracts himself from Knox’s side and heads back up to his room.

Knox stares after him, watching as Charlie goes up the steps by two until he turns the corner and is out of sight.

He slowly walks into the dining room, purposely avoiding making eye contact with both of Charlie’s parents.

“Is there anything I can help with?” Knox asks, picking up one of the forks that had been set down. When catching the Hermés logo etched into the handle, Knox feels incredibly nauseous.

“Everything is all set, Mr. Overstreet, thank you,” Charlie’s mother tells him and while she looks appreciative at the offer, her voice still holds the same prissy coldness to it.

Knox nods his head mutely, because he’s not entirely certain how else he’s supposed to respond to such a definitive answer and the room falls under an incredibly awkward silence. Knox is almost certain he has managed to count every line in the wood floor underneath his foot when he hears the sound of thundering footsteps break him from his train of thought.

He snaps his head up to see Charlie rushing back down the steps in a suit that looks a little bit too small on him, making Knox believe that it was a suit he had purposely left behind. He is clumsily trying to put on his tie in a way that lacked the precision he had when he was helping out Knox, and he barely manages to get his tie wrapped around his neck when knocking sounds at the front door.

Charlie’s mother rushes past the two of them to answer the door and she makes the point of flattening out the creases on her skirt before opening the door.

Knox notices the way Charlie tenses up a tiny bit as his intermediate family begins pouring into the house, all of them having the same brown hair as Charlie but light blue eyes that possess an almost cold quality to them, so he reaches out to grab onto Charlie’s hand.

Charlie is right in step with him and quickly makes work of

interlacing their fingers together and while the grip he has on Knox's fingers will most likely begin to start cutting off the circulation his fingers have to the rest of his body, Knox knows he wouldn't in a million years pull away.

"How many people are in your fucking family?" Knox hisses in an incredulous whisper, watching as *more* of Charlie's fucking family walks through the front door. About fifteen people are now all standing in the foyer of Charlie's house, and that's not evening including Knox and Charlie. "It looks like they're all coming out of a clown car."

"Knoxious, stop, you're gonna make me laugh," Charlie whispers back with a breathy laugh that makes Knox a little relieved that he was able to make Charlie laugh.

None of Charlie's family pays much attention to the two of them as they walk in, all of them practically making a beeline to go over and talk to Charlie's parents, who were both smiling as they went and hugged the rest of the family. It was truly an unnatural phenomenon.

Every once in a while, Knox will catch the speculative glances Charlie's family will shoot at him and Charlie, but none of them make any attempts to go over and talk to them.

Or, at least, that was the case until someone who had to have been a few years older than both Charlie and Knox comes towards them.

From out of the corner of his eye, Knox can see Charlie's lips turn downwards in a scowl as he grasps his hand tighter, something Knox thought would've been impossible to do.

"Charles!" he shouts out in greeting and Knox cringes at the way his voice practically echoes off of the walls. He reaches out a hand to playfully shake Charlie's shoulder in a way that almost sends Charlie to the floor. "How's my favorite family disappointment doing?"

Knox already knows he dislikes this fucking guy, as he reminds Knox of every single frat guy he's ever encountered at a party; the ones who thought that they were better than everyone else because they played sports and came from families who had a ton of money.

"Super," Charlie drawls sarcastically, but Knox can tell the comment hits him harder than he would ever want to admit aloud. "Just living the dream over here."

“Well, I wouldn’t say the *dream* ,” his cousin corrects and the little shit-eating smirk. “You only go to Columbia.”

Oh, yeah. Knox definitely fucking hates this guys guts.

“Not everyone is going to grad school at Harvard,” Charlie scoffs with a roll of his eyes and while Knox picks up on the heavy sarcasm in his voice, Charlie’s cousin must not because he agrees with a “Damn right, not everyone can.”

It’s just then that his eyes fall on Knox, as if finally noticing him for the first time. “Who’s this fucking priss you brought with you?”

Knox’s lips part in surprise at the insult. It wasn’t exactly groundbreaking, but Knox thought that this guy would have at least pretended to be polite to a complete stranger.

He was quickly coming to the revelation that every prenotion he had about Charlie’s family is being proven false, practically deteriorating in front of him the way sugar does in water.

“Bradley, knock it off,” Charlie warns lowly, causing Bradley to halt his movements, and it was at that moment Knox quickly comes to the horrifying realization that this was the person responsible for landing him and Charlie in this fucking shit show in the first place.

If Knox wasn’t trying his hardest to put on a good first impression, he would want to strangle the fucking guy.

“Hey, relax,” Bradley laughs, as if Charlie’s annoyance wasn’t justified, and it’s enough to make Knox squeeze Charlie’s hand back just as hard, a warning sign to Charlie that he was getting just as fed up as he was. “He’s a grown-up, he can introduce himself.”

And just like that, hearing the condescending hint Bradley’s words take on makes all of Knox’s resolve goes out the window.

He straightens himself, trying not to look deterred.

“Knox Overstreet,” he greets cooly, sending a tight-lipped grin in Bradley’s direction as he holds out his free hand firmly. “Charlie’s boyfriend.”

The condescendingly teasing look on Bradley’s face falls in a second at the words. He glances between Knox’s outstretched hand with a look of distaste, which only grows as he notices him and Charlie’s

intertwined hands.

“Hang on a second, Dalton,” Bradley says, half stunned and half disgusted. “You’re *actually* a faggot? You aren’t having a pass at us?”

“I introduced myself as his *boyfriend* , didn’t I?” Knox retorts, his eyes narrowing as he glares at Charlie’s cousin. “I have no clue why the hell you’re so surprised we’re dating, when you’re the one who called Charlie’s father and told him you thought we were dating.”

Bradley’s jaw drops a little in surprise, as if he wasn’t expecting Knox to talk back to him. His shock immediately melts away into an expression of blatant annoyance, his jaw tightly clenching.

“You think you’re a real smart ass, don’t you?”

Bradley takes a few imposing steps forward like he’s ready to deck Knox into the floor but Knox stands his ground, tilting his chin up in challenge. Bradley may have been a few inches taller than Knox, but Knox thinks he could handle him if it came down to it.

“What can I say? Some people say I have a charming effect on them,” Knox retaliates.

“Bradley, I told you to fucking knock it off,” Charlie hisses, his clear attempt at trying to break the pissing contest that was rapidly increasing in tension.

“Or *what* ?” Bradley demands, turning on Charlie with a mocking raise of his brow. “You don’t have the balls to do shit with your father in the room.”

Charlie opens his mouth, but no words come out. He clamps his mouth shut, sending a hard glare in Bradley’s direction. His jaw is practically shaking from how hard it’s clenched.

“That’s what I thought,” Bradley says, grinning smugly before he turns himself around and walks away.

“What a fucking dick,” Knox breathes out as they watch Bradley go up and hug Charlie’s father, with such a fake grin on his face that it almost made him look phony.

Charlie’s father doesn’t seem to care, though. He just keeps looking at Bradley as if he was the poster child for rich young adults everywhere.

“If you don’t like him, you certainly aren’t going to like the rest of the bunch, I can tell you that right now.”

Knox knows for certain that Charlie’s right in saying this, despite how desperately he doesn’t want that to be the case.

Nobody else ends up coming up to them, a factoid that Knox isn’t sure Charlie is relieved or hurt about, and it’s not long before everyone starts making their way towards the dining room to eat dinner.

Charlie waits until a majority of his family is filtering out of the foyer before looking up at Knox with a familiar-looking smirk and asking, “So, are you ready to come and follow me into the pits of hell?”

Knox laughs weakly at the joke and pulls Charlie in close to his side, the fabric of his suit feeling smooth underneath his fingertips. The way Charlie’s lips turn up into the likes of a more genuine smile doesn’t go unnoticed by Knox.

“In sickness and in health and all that other good shit, right?” he asks with a small grin of his own and it’s barely a few seconds after he gets the question out that a sudden thought crosses his mind.

Knox can’t help the worried look he sends in Charlie’s direction.

“Wait a second, there’s at least going to be a kid’s table, right?”

At every single one of his family gatherings- *especially* Thanksgiving- there had always been a kids table.

Even with as outwardly homophobic and judgemental as Charlie’s cousins were, they all appeared to be around his age. He could manage at least *some* sort of interaction with them if he was stuck at a table with just them. That wouldn’t exactly be the case if he has to sit at a table with Charlie’s father for the entirety of Thanksgiving dinner; if that was going to be the case, he has without a shadow of a doubt that he wouldn’t be able to survive the meal unscathed.

“No there’s not a fucking *kids* table,” Charlie hisses incredulously and Knox’s stomach fucking plummets. “The hell kind of Thanksgiving does your family have where the college kids sit at the goddamn *kids table.”*

“Don’t you *dare* lay your blatant disrespect on Mary Overstreet’s family traditions,” Knox tells Charlie teasingly, the two of them beginning to slowly walk towards the dining room.

When they reach the threshold of the doorway, Knox can see that Mr. Dalton is talking to someone in the corner of the dining room, his eyes narrowed slits. His voice is in a quiet whisper, but the closer they get, the more Knox can pick up on what they're saying, or- more accurately- who the conversation he's having is referring to. Charlie's father isn't outwardly saying a name, but there's no doubt about it in Knox's mind that he knows exactly who they're talking about.

"- he used to have a lot of potential but he's wasting it all on soccer and all his other *hobbies* ," Charlie's father is saying, practically spitting out the words. "It's such a disappointment to witness my own son go so far downhill."

The man Charlie's father is talking to- some uncle, if Knox remembers correctly from Charlie's rundown- frowns and Knox can feel the heat of his reproachful gaze on him.

"So, is that-?"

"I made the mistake of thinking he was going to drop this whole being into *men* thing but I suppose Charles always needs to have everybody's attention on him."

Knox continues walking towards the dining room with a guiding hand on the small of Charlie's back, trying to make it seem like he hadn't heard a thing while at the same time attempting to get Charlie far away from the conversation as quickly as possible so he wouldn't hear anything, but judging from the way Knox can feel the muscles of Charlie's back tense up, Knox knows Charlie heard every single word.

In an attempt to make Charlie feel better, Knox gently squeezes Charlie's side, which prompts Charlie to halt his movements and stare up at him. There's a slightly hurt expression on his face but melts considerably the longer they stare at one another.

Knox raises a silent eyebrow in questioning, his way of asking if Charlie is ready to get this dinner done and over with.

He's met with a determined nod in return, and it gives Knox all the courage he needed to lead Charlie the rest of the way into the dining room.

They were about two hours into the dinner and the evening was going just about as shitty as Knox had expected it to go, which was basically the equivalent of being trapped at a dinner with a bunch of people

who had differing political opinions from one another.

It wasn't even the fact that everyone was arguing with each other- because from an outsider's perspective, everything seemed pleasant enough.

But the thing was, Charlie's parents weren't the type of people to outwardly show that they were arguing. Not really. It was one of the reasons Knox found them so offputting; they never had a demeanor centered around yelling but one based in cold logical reasoning, the kind that dug underneath your skin and boiled underneath the surface in a way that made you overthink everything. Methodical, mechanical, and meticulous.

The whole entire dinner has gone like this so far; most of Charlie's aunts and uncles boast about the accomplishments of their kids while Charlie's parents, in turn, rip into just about every aspect of Charlie's life with a weird sort of nonchalance, leaving Knox to sit there in an uncomfortable silence as his eyes ping pong between all of Charlie's family members.

It was all practically unbearable- especially due to how uncomfortable Charlie looked sitting next to him, his eyes permanently downcast so that he was staring at his food instead of his family- but it was something Knox could trek his way through with gritted teeth, because he was supposed to be the picture-perfect boyfriend, here.

Things take a turn for the worse when instead of focusing their attention on Charlie, Charlie's parents begin to interrogate Knox.

"So, Mr. Overstreet," Mrs. Dalton strikes up conversationally after taking a sip out of her wine glass. When she addresses Knox, he notices the entire table falls silent and that everyone's eyes have now fallen on him, practically unblinking. "Charles told me you're going to school to be a lawyer. That's good. A promising career."

At first, Knox gets annoyed, because that was the hundredth jab one of Charlie's parents have made at him during this entire dinner.

Then, he quickly comes to realize something else.

Charlie's parents still thought Knox was going to school to be a lawyer. Wouldn't Charlie have told. .?

Knox turns his head towards Charlie, whose eyes remain downcast as he forks a piece of turkey into his mouth, purposely not meeting

Knox's eye.

It made him look all the more guilty and Knox hates the frustration he feels, but he can't help it; Charlie lied to his parents, and didn't even think of mentioning that to Knox beforehand, so he was now putting Knox in the position of looking like a gaping, clueless idiot in front of his entire family.

Which was just- fucking brilliant.

"Uh, yeah," Knox says unintelligently, clearing his throat and straightening his posture. It wasn't like he could just backtrack and tell the truth at this point, because if he did it would all fall back on Charlie and his parents would be completely livid with him. Jesus fucking Christ, what the fuck was Charlie *thinking*? "I've been interested in going to law school since I took an advanced placement history class my junior year."

The answer was a half lie; AP United States History and AP Government were Knox's two favorite classes in high school with AP Literature and Composition being a close contender, but the classes ignited his passion for history. *Not* law school.

Whether the answer was a lie or not, it made Mrs. Dalton nod her head, seemingly pleased.

"And how about law school? Are you already considering places you want to go?"

"I don't have to worry about law school applications for a year, still," Knox says, the awkward laugh he lets out sounding forced even to his own ears. He thinks back on all the law schools his father had encouraged him on going. "Stanford was the top school my father wanted me to go to, but he also wanted me to go to Yale since it would be close to home."

He receives another nod of approval from Mrs. Dalton and even one of Charlie's family members looks a little pleased. Charlie just keeps his eyes trained on his plate as he eats, not offering up any comments whatsoever during Knox's inquisition.

"Now, what does your father do for a living?"

It's Charlie's father who asks the question this time.

At a first glance, Knox would've believed that he actually was

interested in getting to know him. But there's a tightness to his expression that makes Knox feel as if Charlie's father is just asking this information as a possible tool to use against him.

"He's a lawyer," Knox replies "He works at a law firm in New Haven, where I'm from. He sometimes travels out of state for cases. My mothers a nurse."

"So, father like son," Mr. Dalton notes haughtily. "It's a shame Charles isn't like that."

Knox's eyebrow twitches a little and the pleasant smile he had on his face transforms into something a little more acidic.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, unfortunately, when it comes down to it, Charles just isn't like me. I had hoped he would have greater ambitions like I did as a young man, but instead all he enjoys doing is finding new ways to piss me and his mother off. Don't you, Charles?"

Charlie slowly looks up from his plate, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. He doesn't reply, which only makes the slight frown on Mr. Dalton's face increase.

"I asked a question, I would *like* to receive an answer."

Charlie shrinks further in on himself, still not saying a word.

Apparently it was what his father was expecting to do because he turns to Knox with a look and says, "See, Mr. Overstreet?" with an almost disappointed sounding quality to his voice. "Case in point."

All Knox does is give a derisive snort in reply, cramming the roll he had on his plate into his mouth so he wouldn't have to reply.

"The dinner is very amazing, Aunt Evelyn," Bradley offers up in an attempt to change the conversation, a smile on his face that looked so fucking phony it made Knox want to scream.

His attempt at changing the conversation makes Mrs. Dalton brighten up- obviously eating this entire thing up- and begins going into detail about a recipe only to be met with more praise from another one of Charlie's aunts.

Bradley glances over at Knox when Charlie's mother isn't looking at

him, his smile turning into a smug-looking smirk. Knox meets the stare with an unimpressed raise of his eyebrow, taking a passive-aggressive sip out of his wine glass so he wouldn't do anything rash, like punch Bradley in the face or anything.

Jesus Christ, Bradley makes him want to throw up.

As Charlie's mother continues talking about how she soaks her turkey in some expensive Italian wine, Charlie reaches out for the spoon that's in the mashed potatoes dish to grab another serving.

The movement causes her to pause midsentence as her eyes flicker over to Charlie, then down at his plate and then back at Charlie again, and Knox can really not find any other word to describe her expression than disgust.

"I don't think you should be eating seconds, Charles," she tells him. "I've noticed you have gained some weight since you left to live with. . . your *boyfriend* . I think it would do you some good to cut back a little bit."

Bradley and a few of Charlie's cousins snicker at the griping comment, and one of his aunts shakes her head in disapproving agreement.

Charlie has the exact opposite reaction; he goes completely rigid, stilling his movements for a few minutes as an almost aghast expression comes onto his face before he slowly goes to put the spoon back without grabbing anything.

Knox narrows his eyes.

It was one thing to completely belittle your child for every little thing they did, but it was something else entirely to start bringing up their weight and say that they were eating too much.

"Your mother has a point, you know," Mr. Dalton goes on, fixing Knox with a look from over the rim of his wine glass. "Do you really condone Charles eating this much at your apartment?"

And that was the last fucking straw.

"You know what? I do, actually," Knox says and ignores the sharp kick Charlie gives him from underneath the table. "He's a varsity soccer goalie for the best ivy league men's soccer team and his metabolism is faster than the average persons. He *needs* to eat a little extra in order to stay healthy."

“The soccer season just ended,” Mr. Dalton points out, with an air of confidence in his voice that clearly makes it sound like he’s got the best of Knox. He doesn’t. “And you don’t know what’s healthy for Charlie; you’re going to be a lawyer, not a doctor.”

“Well, then you don’t have any room to talk either,” Knox retorts icily. And, before he can really think over the words, he blurts out, “Also, I’m not gonna be a lawyer, you fucker.”

From next to him, he can hear Charlie choke on his sip of wine, however, Knox doesn’t look at Charlie as he keeps his gaze stubbornly forward to level Mr. Dalton with a challenging look, *daring* him to ask Knox to elaborate.

The whole table falls eerily silent, all of the small side conversations that were occurring halting right in their place. If Knox had thought the atmosphere was tense before, it had nothing on what it was like right now.

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going to school to be a lawyer,” Knox repeats, more firmly. “I’m going to be a history teacher.”

Everyone sitting at the table is staring at him, varying expressions of astonishment on their faces, but the only facial expression Knox is really able to focus on is Charlie’s; he looks pale and worn-down, but he also looks incredulous, almost as if he was a little angry.

Not being able to take the stares anymore Knox stands up and throws his balled napkin onto his plate.

“I’ll be right back,” he says brusquely, harshly pushing in his chair before spinning around and marching down the hallway towards the same bathroom that he had bandaged Charlie up in last night.

When he entered the bathroom- which was empty and quiet, a nice change from the past two hours of being crammed at a dinner table with Charlie’s family- Knox collapses against the edge of the sink, letting out a quiet curse as the weight of what he had done started to finally weigh on him.

He just snapped at Charlie’s parents. Hell, he called Charlie’s father a *fucker* right to his face while exposing Charlie’s lie about Knox’s career in front of his entire family, for Christ’s sake.

Even if he was just trying to defend Charlie, he still managed to slip up.

Knox slowly lifts his head and the second he catches his reflection in the mirror, he lets out a deep sigh. He looks exactly how it feels, which- to put it mildly- is fucking *exhausted* ; his face feels warm but somehow has the weird effect of looking a sickly pale color, which makes the small bags beginning to form underneath his eyes more prominent.

God, if this was how he felt after one evening with these people, he can't help how Charlie has managed to survive an entire lifetime so far with these people.

Practically having to tear his eyes away from the reflection, he turns on the water and begins to splash water on his face in an attempt to calm himself down.

He doesn't know how long he stands there letting the water for, but it feels like it takes an eternity for him to gain control over the slight tremor in his hands so he can turn off the water.

The water wasn't honestly much of a help in alleviating his anger, but it was enough to make him appear composed enough.

After taking a final look in the bathroom mirror, Knox goes to slowly open the bathroom door, and just when he's about to head back down the hallway towards the dining room, the sound of yelling stops him in his tracks.

A little bit intrigued, he finds his feet move against their own accord as he slowly makes his way in the opposite direction of where he was intentionally heading. The yelling gets increasingly louder the further Knox makes his way further down the hall and when he discovers the source of the noise coming from one of the countless guest bedrooms in the Dalton household, he freezes.

Mr. Dalton and Charlie are both standing in the middle of the room having an argument, but the longer Knox stands there, he quickly comes to realize it's not so much of an argument as it's just Charlie's father practically screaming at Charlie while Charlie is just standing in place, completely paralyzed underneath the tight grip his father has on his wrist, and Charlie-

Charlie's crying. His mouth is tightly pursed and he's staring straight ahead in a way that makes it clear he's trying his hardest to keep his

composure, but the tears running down his face and the way his lips are trembling give him away.

Seeing him cry was a weird and surprising experience for Knox, as in the entirety of their time at Columbia, Knox has never seen Charlie cry once; not during any of Neil's plays or at the end of a sad movie or even back in freshman year when he'd been drunkenly dared by Neil to let Pitts give him a stick and poke tattoo of a slice of pizza that's still on his left ankle to this day in all of its deformed, shitty glory.

Seeing him cry made Knox completely crumble inside and as much as he desperately wants to go in there and dish whatever Charlie's father was giving right back to him he's unable to move, and it wasn't until this exact moment that he truly realizes the negative effects Brian Dalton can have on a person.

"I'm so disappointed in you," he's saying, his voice coming out dangerously sharp. "Time and time again I have given you a chance to be better, but you always find new ways to disappoint your mother and me. When will you just do what we ask you? Is that so goddamn difficult? Is that too fucking difficult of a request to ask of you?"

Charlie is still not meeting his father's eyes, pressing his lips in an even tighter line.

"I-I-"

"You *what,* Charles?"

Charlie doesn't reply, as in that moment his serious expression cracks and suddenly he's crying so much he can't articulate his words properly. It's something his father must've picked up on because his father then spits out, "For the love of God, stop crying. I'm not going to pity you; you're a man, *act like one* ."

Those words don't achieve the effect Mr. Dalton's going for, as they only make Charlie start crying harder.

"You've been so selfish lately," his father goes on. "A *five thousand dollar* credit card bill in the mail this month, Charles. You're mother and I are so sick and tired of us trying to be generous by paying for your college and paying for your rent only to be met with nothing but blatant disrespect-"

"I'm sorry, okay? I didn't mean-"

“You didn’t mean to?” he repeats, the sarcasm in his voice dripping venomously. “You didn’t *mean* to be selfish or you didn’t mean to be such a disappointment?”

Charlie flinches at the question. “Bo-both,” he barely manages to get out. “I’m sorry, I-”

“You’re being nothing but wasteful and irresponsible and frankly, I’ve had enough. I-”

He opens his mouth to continue, but he immediately falls silent when he catches sight of Knox standing in the hallway. He takes a long, deep breath, like he’s trying to compose his obvious agitation at Knox’s presence.

“Has anyone taught you that it’s rude to eavesdrop, Mr. Overstreet?”

Charlie snaps his head towards Knox, his eyes widening a tiny bit before he reaches up and starts scrubbing at his eyes with the palm of his hand in an attempt to make it look like he hadn’t been crying. Knox immediately hates the gesture; hates the fact that even though Charlie is going through his absolute worst, he doesn’t want to seem like he’s vulnerable, and it’s something

Knox tries his hardest not to show his hurt at.

“Yes, sir,” he says slowly, tearing his eyes away from Charlie to give Mr. Dalton the best look of innocence he could conjure up in less than a second. “ I- I just got lost trying to find my way back to the dining room. This is a very large house, you know.”

Mr. Dalton doesn’t really look like he believes the lie and frankly, Knox doesn’t give a single flying fuck if he does. All he’s concerned about right now is Charlie and getting him as far away from his father as he could, which is why he turns his attention back over to Charlie so he can fix him with a long look.

“Charlie, is. . . is everything okay?”

He hopes Charlie can see the question for what it was: an out. An opportunity to finish whatever conversation he was having with his father. He wants Charlie to just take it, he’s practically begging with his eyes for Charlie to take it. But unfortunately, he doesn’t. And his hesitance gives Mr. Dalton enough time to intervene.

“Everything is *fine,* ” he says, and the smile that forms on his face as

he says the words make Knox's stomach twist uncomfortably. "We're just having a very much-needed conversation, aren't we, Charles?"

Mr. Dalton sends Charlie a pointed look.

"I'm okay, Knox, really," Charlie rushes to reply, sending a tremulous smile in his direction that only makes it clear that he's the furthest thing from okay. "Can you give us a few minutes?"

Knox had a bad feeling about where this was going.

"Charlie, I'm not going to-"

" *Please* . Just- don't ask any questions, we'll be right out."

Okay, scratch that: Knox *hated* where this was going. But he knew that part of the reasons Charlie's father was so pissed right now was because of Knox's outburst at the table and that him standing here arguing wouldn't do much to help Charlie's case at all, which is why he decides to shove down all the fight that he had left building up in him.

"Promise?" Knox asks, and the smile Charlie sends in Knox's direction looks a little more genuine around the edges.

"Promise."

Knox nods his head, attempting a little smile of his own at that before he turns around and leaves, but not before fixing Mr. Dalton with a hard look. He doesn't stray far from the guest bedroom, stopping a few doors down so he can see Charlie as soon as he walks out, but with the severity of the situation at hand and with how erratically Knox's heart is beating in his chest, he feels as if he is further away than he actually is.

All he can do while he waits is anxiously drum his fingers against his thigh and what feels like five lifetimes go by before the bedroom door finally creaks open. His head snaps up hopefully but to his disappointment, Mr. Dalton is the one who walks out of the room and while his face looks eerily calm, his trembling hands completely juxtapose his calm demeanor.

He makes his way down the hall, and he looks like he's going to completely breeze past Knox, until he suddenly turns on him and hisses, "Get him out of here right now, I never want to see his face ever again." before marching back down the hallway into the dining

room without so much as giving Knox a second look.

Knox stands there, his mouth agape and his mind practically reeling as the words ran through his head.

I never want to see his face ever again .

Knox rushes down the hall into the guest room with the sneaking but unnerving suspicion that something is wrong and comes to find that Charlie is standing outside on the porch leaning against the railing, staring out at the waves crashing against the shore down below. From behind his hair looked messy, as if he had been running his hands through it and his shoulders were shaking, a clear indicator that Charlie was visibly upset.

Cautiously, Knox slowly walks into the room, opens the sliding glass door, and steps out onto the porch. The chilly ocean breeze makes Knox let out a shuddering breath as he adjusts to the temperature and brings his arms in on himself as he walks over to stand with Charlie, noticing how his shoulders tense at the sound of Knox's approaching footsteps. Forcing himself to not get deterred, Knox goes to stand next to him and leans against the railing in a similar fashion, purposely training his eyes ahead of him towards the sea.

They're standing so close that their shoulders brush together and Knox can feel the muscles in Charlie's shoulders relax a little at the contact.

A thick silence passes.

"My father just cut me off," Charlie suddenly whispers, his voice barely audible over the sound of the crashing waves.

The news hits Knox like a punch in the gut. It makes him feel nauseous and in complete and utter shock, and those words are finally what makes Knox allow himself to turn so he can properly look at Charlie; he's still refusing to make eye contact with him but from this angle, Knox can see his lips trembling in the same way they had been when his father was yelling at him and that his face is blotchy from crying.

Knox swallows in an attempt to clear his increasingly dry throat.

"Charlie, what-"

"My father just financially cut me off," Charlie repeats a tiny bit louder. He sounds exhausted, in a way that someone their age

shouldn't, and also like he wants to lay on the ground and give up, to succumb to whatever negative thoughts are probably running rampant through his head.

"What happened?" Knox asks gently, reaching a hand out so he can touch the crook of Charlie's elbow in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture.

The question finally makes Charlie turn fully towards Knox, although he doesn't give an answer right away. His expression remains blank for the most part, clearly attempting to put on a resilient facade of *some* kind, but there were tears pricking at the corners of his eyes as he mulls over what he's going to say.

When Charlie let out a quiet sigh, Knox knows he found the words he needed to continue.

"He- he said that I was being too irresponsible and reckless with my money, that I had-" Charlie pauses a long moment and Knox gives a tiny nod of encouragement to show that he was listening and that Charlie could continue at his own discretion. "I had embarrassed him 'one too many times' and that it would be for the best if I lived on my own without financial help from now on, so I could really get a glimpse at what the real world was like because he hoped it'd make me 'more appreciative of what they have done for me and make me less selfish than the person I grew up to be.'"

Charlie goes to take a shaky breath, but a loud sob escapes past his lips and just like that, Charlie completely unravels. He attempts to bring a hand up to his mouth to cover up the noise, but the damage had already been done.

Knox slowly brings a hand up to his shoulder.

"Charlie that's so horrible, your father had no right to do something like that," Knox gently tells Charlie, and it takes all of his restraint to not reach out and wipe Charlie's tears away himself.

"It's bullshit, is what it is! " Charlie yells, his voice quivering from the frustration and sadness that's building up. "This entire thing is just such- fucking *bullshit* !"

In his fit of frustration, he wiggles the gold class ring that Knox has seen on Charlie's hand the entirety he's known him and watches as he chucks it over the porch railing, forever lost in the sand down below unless someone walking down the beach came across it. " *Fuck!* "

Charlie continues crying, practically shrinking in on himself and Knox feels almost helpless as he stares at Charlie, unsure of what he was and wasn't allowed to do with him.

Being an empath was something that Knox always prided himself on, but one of the downsides of being one was that he never really had a clue how to deal with anyone's emotions when it came down to it at the end of the day. God, what would Neil do in this situation?

Charlie's crying so hard his words sound a tiny bit muddled, but Knox gives him all the time in the world to speak. "Knox, what the fuck am I going to *do?* I never lived without financial help before, I have no idea how I'm going to pay for food, or the rest of my college tuition, or- holy fuck, our *rent* . What the fuck are we going to do about our *rent?* "

Ever since they moved in together, Charlie's parents have been paying for a majority of their rent, which made the concern Charlie was feeling a reasonable one, one that would make Knox's stomach drop if he thought too much on it.

Right now, he couldn't stand to think about that right now. It wouldn't be the best for either of them in this situation.

"Hey, Charlie, it's going to be alright-" Knox tries, attempting to be the optimist in the situation.

"Is it? Is it *really?* " Charlie immediately cuts off and Knox slams his mouth shut in surprise. "You work a part-time job in a fucking *library* , Knox, can you elaborate on how this is going to be alright?"

Knox can't help the frown that comes onto his face at those words, his polite and sympathetic expression immediately starting to crumble as hurt makes its way to the surface.

"I- *Charlie* , why are-"

"It's because you blew up on my parents!" Charlie yells. "I specifically told you to *let it go* and to not say anything to them but you didn't listen to me. And what did you do? You yelled at my father in front of *everyone* and then told them about your major."

"I didn't know you *lied* to them about me still going to school to be a lawyer," Knox stresses. "Because- what, you were embarrassed by me?"

Charlie sends him a sharp glance at the question, one that was too quick for Knox to properly read into.

“No, ” he grits out, visibly trying his hardest to remain calm. “I am not *embarrassed* by you, Knox. I’d never be embarrassed of you, I have no idea where the fuck you got that from. I lied to them because if I did it would give you a *chance* , that they’d be impressed enough by you that they wouldn’t constantly grill you about your life decisions the same way they grill me about mine.”

“You could have at least let me *know* ahead of time, like when we were planning out all that stuff, instead I had to find out from your *mother* of all people,” Knox points out, letting out an incredulous breath. “Charlie, I was trying to defend you earlier because I care about you and your parents were ripping into you every opportunity they had, I have no idea why-”
“Are you kidding me?” Charlie demands incredulously, and his eyes are flashing with such unbridled anger and hurt that it cuts through Knox’s heart. “Are you *fucking kidding me?* You ‘have no idea why I’m so pissed at you’?’” he pauses a moment so he can stare at the appalled expression on Knox’s face before he segways on. “You’re so fucking naive sometimes, Knox, I swear to *God* . Not everybody has good family lives like you do-”

“-I never *said* everybody did!” Knox cuts him off, his voice finally rising to match the volume Charlie’s had been set at for the majority of their argument.

“And, therefore, you don’t understand that this is *my* family. It doesn’t matter how fucking shitty they are, they’re *my* bruise to poke at, *not* yours,” the longer Charlie rants, the more winded he becomes.“You were the only person I ever considered fucking bringing here because I *thought* you’d understand that but all you’ve been trying to do this entire time is deal with my family problems the way *you* think is best- which has not been any help to me at *all*- and honestly I just- fuck you, Knox,” Charlie lets out an angry breath, reaching up a hand to aggressively wipe at the tears that had escaped during his rant. “*Fuck you.*”

Then Charlie pushes himself off the railing so he is standing and storms into the house, slamming the sliding door behind him so hard Knox is surprised the glass doesn’t break.

Knox stares after Charlie in bewilderment, not being able to fully wrap his brain around what the fuck just *happened* .

He had come out here to try to be there for Charlie- to cheer him up and offer him the support he needs - but instead, not even a full five minutes have passed and Knox had somehow managed to go and make everything worse.

Forcing himself to snap out of his shock, Knox goes to follow the vague direction Charlie had gone. He knows Charlie well enough to know that he wouldn't go back to the dining room- *especially* after getting financially disowned by his family- so there was only one place in the house Knox can think of that Charlie went.

As quietly as possible he makes his way down the hall and up the steps so he doesn't draw any unnecessary attention to himself and when he finds himself standing in the doorway of Charlie's room, he finds that his gut feeling was, in fact, correct, as Charlie was standing next to the edge of his bed cramming his clothes and other miscellaneous belongings he'd brought with him into his bag.

Charlie doesn't look up when Knox comes into the room, or when Knox begins to walk around the room to pack up his things.

He doesn't bother changing out of his suit as he packs, because if Charlie is feeling similar to how Knox is about the entire situation, he knows that they should just pack up everything as fast as possible so they can get the fuck out of there and head straight back to their apartment before it got too late.

The longer Knox packs, the more his initial indignation he had felt during their argument slowly begins to fade away until an unbearable amount of guilt begins to take its place.

When he finally manages to get all of his things packed, Knox looks up and notices that Charlie is in the process of trying to force shut his bag, cursing quietly under his breath as he wrestles with the zipper.

"You need my help with that?" Knox asks weakly, his attempt at trying to break the harsh silence encompassing the room.

Charlie looks up at him, his eyes narrowing a tiny bit before he lets out a sarcastic-sounding scoff, lifts his backpack pointedly over his shoulder, and walks out of his childhood room for what was most likely going to be the last time without taking a glance over his shoulder.

Knox stares after him, letting out a defeated sigh.

So that was how it was going to be, then.

Knox does a quick scan around the room, making sure he grabbed everything and that the room appeared to be in the same meticulously kept way it was before they arrived a few days ago, before throwing his own duffle bag over his shoulder and heading down the stairs, rushing so that he was able to catch up with Charlie.

No one gets up from the dining room at the sound of his or Charlie's footsteps coming down the stairs, so they aren't met with jeering or the sudden bombardment of an angry mob. Instead, Charlie's family just continues on with their dinner, as if Knox and Charlie were never even there in the first place.

Knox figures in the long run that it's for the best that they're acting this way, but it also makes him sick knowing that none of them ever cared about Charlie, or at least cared enough about him enough to acknowledge the fact that he was leaving.

Charlie opens the front door, sending a piqued eyebrow at Knox before turning around and heading outside. Knox follows behind him, not really knowing what else he was supposed to say or do.

It's not until Knox reaches the edge of the porch that he falters.

"Knoxious, come on." Charlie lets out a defeated sigh, looking up at Knox with an expression that hits him like a punch in the gut; he looks so exhausted yet so god damn *resigned* that it makes Knox want to cry. Because it was Charlie's parents who did that. They were the ones who caused this often joyous, free spirit to look so god damn devastated, who made Charlie question all of the amazing things about himself and wonder if they were things he should be self-conscious about.

It makes Knox grind his teeth together.

Oh, fuck this.

He knew that Charlie was going to be absolutely pissed at him for this, but Knox really couldn't find it in himself to care in this moment. He couldn't let this go unsaid.

"Stay, I'll be right there," Knox tells him.

A look of realization dawns on Charlie's face before his face quickly falls into an expression of annoyance. " *Knox* ," he hisses lowly. "What

the fuck are you-"

Knox ignores Charlie's desperate warning in favor of spinning around and marching up towards the door feeling a newfound sense of conviction as he reaches out to pound on the door a few times. He does so a little bit more aggressively than intended, but he wouldn't have felt too sympathetic if his fist went through the thousand dollar door.

Not even a few seconds after he retracts his hand the door swings open to reveal Mr. Dalton.

At first, he appears to be confused, but when realizing who it was, his lips downturned into a frown and Knox fixes Mr. Dalton with a glare to match. His hands are practically shaking.

Mr. Dalton opens his mouth but Knox beats him to it.

"You know, you're seriously the worst father I've ever met in my fucking life."

Mr. Dalton fixes him with a perfectly arched brow, seemingly unimpressed as he stares at Knox in a sickeningly belittling way.

"Is that so?" he asks cooly, crossing his arms over his chest.

The question and the expression he's being met with snaps Knox out of it for a minute, making him lose some of the initial adrenaline he had when storming towards the front door, but he forces himself to continue.

"Yes, you are," Knox tells him, his voice coming out shaker than he would've liked. He doesn't know if it's because he's sick and tired of the condescending way Charlie's dad has looked at him since he got here or if it's because Knox hates himself for appearing weak, but suddenly Knox can't handle the frustration building up in him and sarcastically blurts out, "Do you want me to make you a bulleted list, *sir* ?"

Mr. Dalton doesn't appear to be enthused in the slightest by Knox's quip.

"I see that my son's immature, incessant sarcasm has rubbed off on you, which is a real shame," he drawls languidly. "But go on, please. I am more than intrigued to hear what you have to say."

And with those words, Knox lets the dam break open.

“This entire time I’ve been here, all I’ve witnessed you do is talk down on every little thing Charlie does, every single accomplishment that Charlie has, you somehow manage to go and find a way to twist it around to make it seem like it’s something shitty-”

“With a son like *him* , do you seriously expect me to-”

“No!” Knox cuts off Charlie’s father sharply and is pleased to watch the way his father’s mouth slams shut. “You don’t get to fucking talk.”

Seeing that Charlie’s father was still silent made Knox feel emboldened enough to continue.

“All you ever do is talk down on him and just about everything he cares about, to the point where it’s downright abusive and Charlie isn’t proud of the person he fucking *is* anymore because you make him feel guilty for feeling good about himself.”

Mr. Dalton looks taken aback at the accusation before his expression morphs into one of anger. “How dare you accuse me of abusing my own son-”

“You don’t think that what you're doing is abuse, but that’s what it is. Fuck, why did you even want to have a kid if you were just going to be controlling their every move?”

“I would never abuse my own child. Charles just needs more discipline because he is an ungrateful, disrespectful--”

“He’s neither of those things and you *know* that,” Knox hisses. “Charlie’s passionate about life, and is so damn witty, and he makes me laugh harder than anyone I’ve ever met in my entire life. And I feel sorry for you, because you can’t see all of these amazing things about your son because you’re too pissed he doesn’t fit perfectly into the square mold you designed for him.”

“Don’t put words into my mouth, Mr. Overstreet,” Mr. Dalton says in a dangerously low voice. “You can’t just come here and make these-*accusations* when you don’t have any evidence to back them up.”

“I don’t have to, your actions speak for themselves,” Knox spits out and before he can think over the words, he adds, “I hope you ruining your relationship with your son because of your reputation was worth

it, you fucking douche canoe."

And without giving Mr. Dalton the satisfaction of getting the last word in, Knox turns around and marches towards his car.

At some point during the argument, Charlie had went to get into the passenger seat of Knox's car

and when Knox clambers into the driver's side and puts on his seatbelt, Charlie doesn't say anything or look at him, opting to gaze out the passenger window.

Knox isn't too surprised Charlie's not talking to him since he's most likely still pissed at him, but to Knox's surprise when they were nearing the end of the street, Charlie speaks up.

"I seriously cannot believe you told my father off," he says, but he doesn't sound nearly as mad as Knox expected him to be about it; he still sounds a little mad but he also sounds like he's in disbelief, and appears to be the slightest bit impressed, too. "What was it that you called him?" he asks and yeah- Charlie *definitely* was starting to seem impressed. It gave Knox the tiniest shred of hope. "A-"

"A douche canoe," Knox fills in. His lips trembling from trying to keep his laughter in at just how completely and utterly *absurd* it all was, and Knox doesn't know who is the one to crack first, but suddenly the two of them burst out laughing.

"You're so fucking ridiculous, Knoxious, I swear to *God* ," Charlie manages to get out weakly after calming down a little bit. He lets out a loud sigh. "Douche canoe," he repeats, shaking his head. "Are you- out of all the insults you could've used, you settled on *that?* "

"Well, I felt like I was going to shit myself the entire time, so it wasn't like I could come up with a very good insult or anything," Knox is quick to defend himself, even if he's still chuckling a little bit over the fact. He's rewarded with another one of Charlie's loud laughs in return. It's not until the laughter fully dies down that Knox has the courage to whisper out, "I'm sorry."

The words cause Charlie's annoyance to resurface, as all he does is let out a huff.

"For?"

Knox purses his lips a tiny bit, thinking. He knows that he could say a

lot right now, but wording was key; he didn't want to prolong this argument yet he didn't want to sound disingenuous in his apology and possibly risk scaring Charlie off somehow, either.

"A lot of things," he settles on. He pauses a moment so he can look both ways for oncoming traffic before turning onto the main road leading out of Cape Cod. "I'm sorry that I snapped at your parents in front of everyone at the dinner; I thought it was the right thing to do in the heat of the moment and I believed that by intervening I would help with the situation when all it did was make things worse."

"Yeah, no fucking shit," Charlie scoffs, not quite meeting Knox's eye as he puts his chin in his palm.

Knox tries his hardest to not let it deter him and forces himself to continue.

"Charlie, I'm *serious* . I'm- so fucking sorry, okay?" he cries out, trying his hardest to get across just how much he meant the words. "I- I thought I could just magically solve all of your family problems and make your parents treat you better just by me being around to defend you when you should've been the one to defend yourself, but I never gave you that option and just assumed what was best for you. And now because I didn't think anything through I'm the reason you got financially cut off from your family."

Charlie observes him quietly, his lips parted.

"You don't think anything through because you think with your heart instead of your head, Knoxious," is what Charlie says, but he doesn't come across as chastising when he says the words, which is something Knox takes as a good sign. He lets out a long, almost dejected sounding sigh. "I'm honestly still a little pissed and humiliated that you did that in front of my entire family, but I do accept your apology. I needed to hear that."

Knox nods his head.

Accepting the apology was good; it meant they were heading in the right direction.

"Contrary to what you said, though, you're not the main reason my father cut me off."

When catching Knox's *don't bullshit me* expression it makes Charlie snort half-heartedly. "Oh, you definitely contributed, I'm not

downplaying that, but-" he pauses for a moment, considering his words. "I have a feeling my parents have been looking for an excuse the last couple years to properly get me out of their lives, you were just the one that ended up being the most convenient to them. If it didn't happen tonight, it would've been for some other bullshit reason further down the line." he lets out a long sigh that blows some of his bangs away from his eyes. "It just blows that they couldn't have done it after I graduated."

All Knox can do is let out a hum of agreement at the words.

The car falls into silence for a few minutes as they continue down the highway, the only noise coming from the car heater and the crackle from the radio as a commercial about car insurance plays.

"How much did you overhear?" Charlie suddenly asks. "When my father was yelling at me, I mean."

"Honestly, not that much," Knox says truthfully. "I was heading back to the dining room from the bathroom and I heard yelling and when I walked down the hall I heard something about a credit card bill."

Charlie nods his head, an almost relieved look coming on his face. "Okay," is all he says, the finality in his voice silently disputing any sort of clarification. "Good."

Knox has the sneaking suspicion that Charlie isn't telling him something that he should be, but he doesn't dare to push it.

Whatever was on Charlie's mind, he was going to come out and say when he's ready to.

They're nearing the Rhode Island border when it begins snowing out.

Knox has been driving for about an hour and a half at this point and as much as he loves snow, he really wishes the first big snowfall of the year *wouldn't* have begun occurring when he was trying to make the three-state long trek back to his apartment.

Charlie fell asleep about a half-hour ago, his forehead pressed up against the passenger window and using his suit jacket as a makeshift blanket. There's a little bit of drool coming out of the corner of his mouth, which Knox should find absolutely disgusting, but instead, he finds it to be endearing.

Fuck, he had it bad.

Knox tears his eyes off of Charlie so he can focus on driving for a while and its right as he crosses the border into Rhode Island that an idea suddenly pops into his head.

It's honestly one of Knox's more ridiculous ideas; it's so downright cheesy and cliche and he knows Charlie is going to laugh him into next week over it. But Knox's leg has been starting to fall asleep for the better part of ten minutes and he needed to move and also wanted to do something that would cheer Charlie up, even if it would almost be at his own expense.

Knox turns on his blinker so he can pull off the main highway and head towards the rest stop parking lot.

As if sensing the sudden change in route, Charlie slowly blinks his eyes open.

"Are we close yet?" he asks, his voice coming out a few octaves lower due to disuse.

Knox shakes his head.

"No, we're not," he tells him as pulls into a parking spot.

Right as Knox shifts the car into park, Charlie turns towards him with a look of confusion on his face.

"Uh, Knoxious?" he asks, rubbing his eye with the heel of his hand. "What exactly are we doing here?"

"We, Charlie Dalton," Knox begins, trying his hardest to keep his voice neutral. "Are going to be dancing."

Knox unbuckles his seat belt before quickly making an effort to connect his phone to the aux cord, and he doesn't have to look over to know that Charlie is sending him an incredulous look.

" *Dancing?* " Charlie repeats.

Knox ignores the question in favor of rolling down his windows, clicking play on the song he loaded up on his phone before walking around the car to the passenger door.

Paul McCartney's voice accompanied by the playing of a piano begins to echo in the deserted rest stop parking lot. Charlie tips his head

back, laughing up at the roof of the car.

“ *Hey Jude?”* Charlie asks him, sending Knox a smirk as he watches Knox open up his car door. “ *Seriously?”*

“You shouldn’t expect any less of me.” Knox teases weakly, his hand practically shaking as he holds it out for Charlie to grab a hold of.

Charlie stares down at the outstretched hand, and for a moment, Knox thinks Charlie is going to slap it away and make him get in the car.

But that’s not what he does.

Instead, Charlie reaches out to lace their fingers together and allows Knox to gently pull him out of the car and out into the freezing Rhode Island parking lot.

Something about them holding hands this time is different, for a myriad of reasons, but the main one that sticks clear in Knox’s mind is that there’s nobody around to watch them do it. There’s no prying eyes and the two of them don’t have to ‘sell’ their relationship to anybody; it’s just him and Charlie in this shitty, abandoned-looking rest-stop parking lot and Knox knows that there’s something much deeper than it appears to be at the surface level going on here. He can practically feel it in every single fiber of his body as he slowly guides Charlie further away from his car and out into the parking lot so they can have ample dancing room but he almost eats shit and falls on his face.

Knox’s clumsiness causes Charlie to let out a loud, ringing laugh that contrasts the gentle and caring way he’s helping Knox stabilize himself.

“Clutz,” Charlie simply mouths to him, his lips curling around the word in a way that makes Knox feel warm inside.

He slowly winds his hands around Charlie’s waist, resting his hands on the small of his back as he reels Charlie in towards him until they’re standing chest to chest and in turn, Charlie brings his hands up so that they’re looped loosely around Knox’s neck.

At first their movements are awkward- tentative- as they shift in time with the tambourine, the both of them clearly getting accustomed to what it’s like dancing with the other. Knox hums a little along and it’s right as the drums kick in that they really begin to move and let themselves go, their movements getting more and more wild as the

music crescendos into the four-minute outro.

They step over each other's toes a little bit as a result of the frenetic movements in a way that makes Charlie quick to call Knox out for it every time he does so, but Knox blocks out Charlie's teasing criticisms by obnoxiously singing along with Paul McCartney's falsettos as he over exaggeratedly sways him and Charlie along to the music, leaving Charlie to helplessly go along with his movements. There are tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks as they move and his laughter is so god damn infectious that it makes Knox fall into a giant fit of laughter as well and as far as he was concerned, nothing else mattered in this moment more than getting to dance with Charlie and to laugh with him, consequences be damned about what their financial situation was going to be in the following months.

Everything comes to a complete standstill as the song begins to fade out, and it's right at this moment that it dawns on Knox how close they actually are. He can make out more of Charlie's features that he normally wouldn't have before; the light freckles dotted across his nose that Knox almost had to squint to notice them, the faint start to smile lines that graced the corners of his eyes and his lips-

His lips.

They're still bent in that oh-so-familiar smirk, the one that Knox has memorized all of the lines of with his eyes closed the same way he has memorized the drive to his childhood home. Still barely a breath away from Knox's own. It was absolutely maddening.

Their close proximity must be registering with Charlie because Knox watches as his smirk slowly fades away, something akin to softness almost taking over his features. The expression prompts Knox to bring one of his hands up so that he was gently cupping the side of Charlie's face, his fingers lightly grazing across the sharp edges of his jawline.

Charlie clears his throat weakly, but he doesn't make any attempts to pull away. "Knoxious," he murmurs, the way he breathes out Knox's name sending chills down his spine. "You good?"

Knox distantly wonders if his face was as red as it felt.

"Yeah," he says, his voice coming out a little more than a whisper. He echoes Charlie and clears his throat a little as well in an attempt to clear his thoughts. "Totally good. Super."

Charlie gives him a small smile at that, looking almost exasperated

and completely done with Knox's shit, and Knox can't help but think that it was the most genuine smile he's ever seen Charlie Dalton give.

The wind begins picking up a little bit around outside, tousling their hair in the breeze, but neither of them make an effort to move. They just merely continue to stare at each other.

And then, Knox watches with an erratically beating heart as Charlie's dark eyes slowly flicker down Knox's face and zero in on his *lips* and Knox thinks he's going to fucking pass out.

Charlie leans forward a little bit, getting up on his tiptoes a little, and Knox leans forward, too, and they're so close. They're so fucking close that Knox would only have to move an inch and they would be-

Charlie moves his head and Knox's breath catches because he thinks Charlie's going to be the one to close the gap, but instead of pressing their lips together he's pulling away right as the song on Knox's phone changes, and just like that, whatever spell that has settled over them becomes completely eradicated.

No, please don't go , Knox wants to plead. *Please-*

But Knox is rendered completely speechless; all he can do is stare as Charlie gets into the car.

Deep down, he knows kissing Charlie would've been a terrible idea; he'd just gotten disowned and financially cut off from his entire family not even a few hours ago and was probably feeling more disconsolate than he was letting on. The last thing Charlie needs on top of trying to find his own financial footing was to start a new relationship with someone, when what he really needs is someone to just be there for him without expecting anything in return.

Knox is aware he's going to have to be the person, since they're roommates and Knox is one of Charlie's closest friends. He *wants* to be that person. He really, truly does. So why does he feel so god damn *disappointed* right now?

Knox just stands there as more and more snow builds up in his hair, and it's the wind beginning to pick up outside that finally breaks him out of his daze, and miraculously, he finds a way to put one foot in front of the other and get in his car.

Charlie doesn't turn to look at Knox as he buckles his seatbelt and starts driving out of the rest stop parking lot, opting to stare out the

window at all the passing scenery as he drums his fingers mindlessly against his thigh, and while Knox doesn't really expect Charlie to make a comment on anything or to even want to *talk* to him after they almost kissed, he still wants to ask him about it. He still wants to know whether or not this unspoken thing going on between them was one-sided or if it was a two-way streak; if he had been reading too much into Charlie's actions or if there actually was something worth over-analyzing there.

He wants to ask all of that and more, but he doesn't. He just keeps on driving.

They Say It's Your Birthday

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the Thanksgiving Shit Show™, Knox tries to reflect on

Chapter Notes

I feel like its a common theme in all of my author's notes for these past chapters for me to say something along the lines of 'I had absolutely no intention on making the chapter this long' but holy fuck, I had absolutely NO intentions on making this chapter so damn long. So I greatly apologize for the month-long wait that came along with this chapter, I'm really hoping as I get closer to completing this fic that my chapters will start being uploaded on a more studious schedule.

As always, shout out to @auxctor for being such a great beta and friend throughout the majority of this fic so far. I honestly don't think I would be able to get this fic done if it wasn't for them and they've converted me into fully supporting the aro-ace Meeks headcanon. Another thank you to @elonuarry for being like a big sister to me over these past few weeks and allowing me to rant about all things Knarlie

I also have to give a special thanks to @cloudninetynine, who made an AMAZING playlist inspired by this fic, which you can find linked at the end of the chapter. Seriously, I'm so touched that you made this playlist, you rock.

Anyways, here's the chapter, and I hope you all enjoy! <3 All of the overwhelming support I've been receiving on this fic means more than words can properly encapsulate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox only ends up driving a half-hour longer before the exhaustion kicks in and the snow becomes too unbearable for him to continue driving any further.

He has Charlie Google a hotel to call up for them to stay the night at and Charlie manages to find one roughly ten minutes away with a pretty decent rate, which is how the two of them end up in the deserted parking lot of a motel located in a small Connecticut town

close to the Rhode Island state border.

As soon as Knox shifts his car into park he squints at the one-story building in front of him since he never got to see the place Charlie made the impromptu reservations for and once he properly registers his surroundings, Knox was left trying to comprehend just what the *hell* kind of place Charlie booked over the phone, because it looked like nobody has inhabited it in over ten years, easy. There's some moss growing on the brick on the outside due to a lack of maintenance and

Knox swears on his life that one of the motel room windows appears to be cracked with what appears to be a bullet hole.

So that's a rather lovely, reassuring observation.

"Charlie, are you *sure* we're at the right place?"

He turns towards Charlie to send him a look, only to find that Charlie was staring deadset ahead at the motel, drumming his fingers against the center counsel in a way that Knox was now coming to realize was a nervous tic.

Charlie wasn't necessarily avoiding Knox, per se, not like he did when Knox accidentally pissed him off back at their parent's house earlier, but Charlie *definitely* wasn't acting himself. His eyes would dart around anxiously as he talked, his words coming out a little stilted in a way that was-

Awkward, almost.

Knox never knew that the word 'awkward' could have *ever* been an applicable way to describe Charlie Dalton, but Knox felt as if no other word could properly give his behavior justice.

"Uh, yeah," Charlie says in the slow, stilted way his voice has taken on for the entirety of their drive through Rhode Island. It makes Knox internally cringe but he has no idea on how to even address it so he tries as hard as he can to ignore it. "Google Maps lead us here so I'm at least assuming it is."

Knox has to practically swallow the helpless laugh that's threatening to escape. "So you're telling me," he starts, trying to keep his voice as calm as possible. "You booked this place that has bullet holes in the windows and thought that it was *okay?* "

Charlie shoots Knox an offended look at that.

“The pictures online didn’t *show* the bullet hole windows,” he says, defensive. “It looked way nicer in the advertisement photos online. Fucking false advertising is going to get us murdered and I’m absolutely *livid* about it.”

Knox shoots Charlie a hesitant look in return.

“We could always cancel and try finding somewhere else to go?” he suggests hopefully.

“Knox, no. You’re *exhausted* ,” Charlie sighs, reaching for his duffle in the backseat while he talks. “The roads are shit. You almost got us into an accident on the way here.”

Knox winces as he thinks back on the drive; how he had swerved a little too hard on one of the corners he’d taken and triggered his tires to start spinning out against the patch of black ice he was driving on.

“It wasn’t *that* bad,” he tries and the look Charlie sends him at that has Knox quickly grabbing for his own duffle bag and following Charlie out of his car.

The wind outside is far worse than Knox anticipated, practically biting at his skin as he fights against it, and he and Charlie quicken their pace to get to the lobby of the motel so they wouldn’t have to spend an unnecessary amount of time out in the cold.

As they walk by one of the rooms- room number eighteen- Knox sees that the window is completely shattered. Charlie noticeably eyes the glass fragments all over the snow-covered payment and it’s when Knox realizes there’s a crushed up water bottle that could potentially be a meth lab that he wants to just sleep in the damn car, as all of this was starting to make Knox feel as if he was in the real-life version of those photos. The ‘when you see it you’ll shit bricks’ ones, except each thing that Knox starts noticing is a possible indicator that his life is in mortal peril.

“God, this place is giving me the fucking *creeps* ,” Charlie grumbles as he takes a few steps closer to Knox.

Usually, in these types of situations, Charlie was always the one who tried being the rational one. He didn’t offer up logical explanations for every single thing- *that* was left for Meeks to do- but he often kept a level-minded head on his shoulders and didn’t react over-zealously or

show how unnerved he actually was.

This was most definitely *not* one of those situations and Knox really couldn't fault him because he was in a hundred percent agreement with Charlie right now. This place clearly was a set up to a horror movie of some kind, to the point where it was starting to make Knox contemplate whether he was going to be the virgin that survives to the end of the movie or the person who gets killed within ten minutes because they're not paying attention to their surroundings. As much as he would like to be the former, he knows for a fucking fact he's the latter.

Knox humors Charlie by letting out a snort of agreement as he pulls open the door that leads into the lobby to try lessening the stress building up inside him, letting Charlie walk through the door first before following closely behind him.

On the surface level, the place doesn't look all that terrifying, but there is something foreboding about the plain white walls and the sheer orange curtains that makes the hair on the back of Knox's arms stand up.

"You think we'll find Mrs. Bates decaying in their basement somewhere?" Knox asks lowly, eyeing a stain he notices in the green shag carpeting of the lobby that looks too eerily similar to blood to give Knox comfort.

He's grateful to hear Charlie let out a loud snicker behind his hand at the dumb pop culture reference; they can be awkward about almost kissing each other, yes, but at least they can all put all of that behind them when they're in fear for their fucking lives.

"Oh, hundred percent," he agrees, laughter laced in his voice. Knox watches as Charlie's eyes scan the lobby before nodding his head towards the opposite side of the room. Knox follows Charlie's line of sight to see he's staring at the bathroom in the lobby. "'Duties call' and all shit," he says, giving Knox a pat on the shoulder. "I'll be back in a sec."

Knox darts his eyes around the lobby nervously.

"I- Charlie, are you *sure* you have to go to the bathroom right now?" he whisper-asks, sounding scared-shitless even to his own ears. "In *here* ?"

"I've been holding it for the past *hour and a half* , Knox," Charlie

whispers back fiercely, sounding slightly pained. “If I hold it any longer there’s going to be fucking *issues* .”

A snort escapes Knox against his own volition, which makes Charlie glower the tiniest bit before he fully faces Knox.

“If I don’t come out of the bathroom in ten minutes, you know what happened to me,” is all he says in a definitive voice that leaves no room for arguments and before Knox gets the chance to beg Charlie to stay with him and not wander off in this place by himself, Charlie heads off towards the bathroom, leaving Knox to deal with checking into this murder trap by himself.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Knox turns the front desk, bracing himself by drawing his shoulders back.

It’s only fifty-four dollars, it’s only fifty-four dollars, it’s only fifty-four dollars , he thinks like a mantra as he slowly walks up towards the exhausted-looking high schooler who’s sitting behind the counter. Even though her phone’s hidden from sight, it’s clear from the way her neck is craned down that she’s been sitting on her phone for the entirety of her shift so far, scrolling through social media as a way to pass the time.

In spite of all the nervous energy that has been building up inside of Knox since arriving at this place, he can’t help but feel genuinely bad for the receptionist. This place wasn’t exactly a Hampton and looked like it probably was crawling with creeps; not something that was ideal when you were working a minimum wage part-time as a teen or young adult.

Knox quietly clears his throat so he can get her attention, which proves to work as her head immediately snaps up at the noise. A light blushing a light crimson when she catches Knox’s eye and it’s then that Knox remembers he’s still wearing the tux he had on at Charlie’s Thanksgiving dinner, and probably looked like an absolute *moron* to this girl.

“H-hi,” she greets sheepishly, turning off her phone and turning it so it was backside up on the counter. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

“Uh, yeah,” Knox says, attempting a polite smile. “I called about a reservation. It should be under Knox Overstreet?”

The receptionist’s eyes immediately lit up and before Knox can even

blink she starts furiously typing something on the computer, the sound of her fingers clicking against the keys echoing all throughout the otherwise abandoned lobby.

“Yeah, I got you right here,” she says. “Can I see your identification and reservation confirmation?”

Knox nods his head, quickly loading up his email to open the confirmation message he had received while driving before fishing out his wallet and placing his driver’s license next to his phone on the counter for the receptionist to look at.

She does a quick scan over both of them before nodding her head and turning her attention back towards the computer, typing something else out as she begins chatting with Knox about the motel’s free breakfast and some of the possible things they can do in town.

It’s while she’s in the middle of her rant that Charlie ends up coming out of the bathroom, standing flush against Knox’s side as he leans against the counter, nodding along to whatever the receptionist is saying as if he’d been standing here the entire time. After realizing she’s not paying attention to him he looks up at Knox with an ‘I actually made it out alive, I can’t believe this shit’ expression on his face that was almost enough to make Knox start laughing right in the middle of the receptionist’s spiel.

She doesn’t notice Charlie’s presence until she looks away from her computer to ask if Knox had any question, and Knox is thankful that Charlie had chosen that moment to go on his phone because he ends up missing the look that she gives the two of them.

It’s a look of comprehension that makes Knox blush, an ‘oh, I see what’s happening here’ sort of look that implies that Knox and Charlie are dating and are a couple who just sporadically decided to crash during holiday travels at this motel together. It’s a concomitant that various strangers have been making over the past few months- Nolan, that girl working at the Haunted Hayride, and now this random receptionist- so Knox *should* be used to people believing that he and Charlie were dating at this point. But there was something about the fact that there were other people who saw something between him and Charlie; that Knox wasn’t just completely losing his goddamn mind over this. . . *whatever* he had with Charlie, that made him feel vindicated in his feelings, while at the same time completely embarrassed that these people who don’t even know Knox can put together after a few seconds of meeting him that Knox was completely

and utterly in love with his best friend.

“Would you like a king or two queens?” she suddenly asks Knox, not so subtly glancing between him and Charlie.

The question makes Charlie glance up from his phone.

“Huh?” he asks, frowning a tiny bit at the receptionist.

Knox feels his face grow warmer.

Jesus fucking Christ, this was *not happening right now* .

“A king or two queens?” she repeats slowly, her voice piquing in a way that made the euphemism behind the question known.

“Two queens,” he tells her, purposely avoiding the heat of Charlie’s stare as he slides his credit card across the counter towards her.

For the first time during their entire conversation, she falters, blushing a dark red.

“Holy shit, I’m so sorry,” she rushes to apologize, quickly picking up Knox’s card to punch in the credit card number. “I thought-”

“It’s uh- it’s an easy mistake to make,” Knox attempts to play off, but the environment has become filled with such a thick awkwardness that his words end up falling on deaf ears. He turns towards Charlie to see if he was going to back him up on this one, only to see that Charlie had his head trained downward, staring at his shoes as he kicked an imaginary pebble.

After that the receptionist practically speeds through the checking-in process, going through the motions so fast that she almost forgets to give Knox his credit card back when she slides his room key over to them.

Knox tries his hardest not to seem too embarrassed as he wishes her a good night and heads back outside with Charlie following closely behind him, but judging from Charlie’s uncharacteristic silence as they walk all the way to their room located at the end of the building, Knox knows he failed miserably, *especially* considering that Charlie hadn’t even brought the receptionist misunderstanding, not even as a humorous anecdote.

His hands tremor a little as he fiddles with the lock of their room, a

combination of nerves from how close Charlie was standing behind him and the chilly wind that's whistling outside. It takes him a few attempts to get the key in the lock, but after Charlie frustratedly hisses, "If you don't fucking open the door, *I* will," Knox manages to turn the knob and the door shudders open.

Much like the rest of the motel, their room appeared to be frozen in the seventies; there were two queen-size beds with bright orange comforters on them, wood paneling that lined the entirety of the room, multiple ostentatious paintings that made Knox feel high just by looking at them, a plant and some weirdly shaped lamps in one corner, and a small box tv on top of the dresser in the other. The whole setting gave Knox a jarring feeling, as seeing a motel room with this specific style was surreal and looked like a complete juxtaposition to how hotel rooms are furnished now. It all made him feel like he was stepping into a preserved museum exhibit he shouldn't be allowed to spend the night in.

Knox quickly steps inside in an attempt to put as much distance between him and Charlie as possible, making a beeline to the closest bed to the door so he could place his stuff on the ground next to it, a mark of claim.

A quiet but very noticeable " *fuck!* " followed by the sound of something falling to the ground on the other side of the room snapped Knox out of his reverie for a moment and made him turn towards Charlie so fast he almost fell over. Charlie was in the process of messing around with the heater near his bed by slamming his hands on the sides of it to try and get the damn thing to turn on but somewhere in his attempt to do so, he knocked over one of the lamps. The lamp didn't break or anything, thank *God* , but how the hell Charlie managed to knock it over was beyond him.

Knox can't help the tiny snort of amusement that escapes him as he slowly approaches the other side of the room.

"Hey," he says a little awkwardly in an attempt to get Charlie's attention. The attempt proves to be a success, as Charlie quickly stops whatever the hell it is that he thinks is going to get the heater to turn on and snaps his head to stare up at Knox. For a moment, the heat of his gaze makes Knox forget what he was going to ask, but he quickly manages to regain his footing and asks, "Did you need to go into the bathroom at all for anything right now?"

Charlie shakes his head, frowning a tiny bit.

“No, I’m all set over here,” he tells him, and the flippant, almost sarcastic way he answers makes Knox smile a tiny bit. “Why, what’s up?”

“I was just gonna go change outta-” Knox breaks off to awkwardly gesture down to his now heavily wrinkled suit.

Thankfully, Charlie catches his drift and nods his head again.

“Oh, yeah. You can go in their first, Knoxious, I’m just gonna keep fiddling with this to see if I can get it to work so we don’t die of hypothermia while we’re sleeping.”

“Alright, cool,” Knox says with a little half-smile, anxiously rolling on the balls of his feet.

“Cool,” Charlie echoes half-heartedly.

They share a long look- one where neither of them says anything but is one that conveys so much tension it makes Knox internally panic- before Charlie bends his head downward and resumes the task of banging his hands on various spots of the heater.

Knox takes that as his cue to turn around, and as he walks back across the room to grab his duffle bag and head over to the little adjoining bathroom their room has, Knox cannot help the slight cringe he does.

God, what the fuck *happened* to them?

For the longest time, Knox had valued his friendship with Charlie because it was one of those rare ones where he got along so easily with the other person that they never seemed to have any arguments with each other outside of playful teasing or the occasional disagreement.

Now, it seemed like they couldn’t even last a full two days without arguing with each other or unintentionally pissing the other person off, or landing in a situation where they both felt so awkward around each other that they didn’t know how to properly act around the other anymore.

Knox hated it. He hated it so fucking much. But he was so out of his element on how to deal with the situation that he didn’t feel like he could *do* anything other than to just let it fester and to let whatever path this weird relationship he was finding himself in run its course naturally.

He tries his hardest to shove down the feelings of immense panic and all of the negative thoughts that were slowly trailing behind them as he opens the bathroom door but it turns out he doesn't have to try too hard in order to do so because it was at that exact moment he takes in the bathroom of their motel room for the first time.

There was no other way Knox could describe it but downright *nauseating* ; the walls were a bright lemon yellow with a tiled lime green flower pattern to act as some sort of accent throughout the room, complete with a lime green toilet to match the accents and a shag orange rug.

It was something straight out of Knox's interior decorating nightmares.

Knox tries his hardest not to parse his surroundings too much and focuses on getting out of his suit and changing into his pajamas; he's almost positive staring at the walls for an extended period of time was going to give him a fucking migraine or trigger his brain into going on an acid trip of some kind.

When he comes out of the bathroom after brushing his teeth he sees that Charlie's attempt at getting their heater to turn on was a successful one and that he was currently laying on top of the orange comforter on his bed in his pajamas, scrolling idly on his phone.

Twitter , Knox assumes knowingly, pausing in the bathroom doorway for a moment so he could properly take Charlie in, admire the way his eyebrows scrunch the tiniest amount as he peers down at his phone.

He doesn't look up at the sound of Knox's footsteps as he pads out of the bathroom to flick off their bedroom light wordlessly or when he places his stuff down, but he does look up when Knox walks over on Charlie's side of the room to turn on the little TV.

For a few moments, Knox is left staring at the static as he jams a few buttons on the remote to try and get it to change to regular sound and picture, but the brightness of the TV makes him squint and the hissing sound emitting from the television is making Knox's skin crawl as he painfully gets reminded of that scene in Poltergeist when that little girl has her hands pressed up against a television that looked eerily similar to the one he's standing in front of.

"Knoxious, do you need my help or what?" Charlie asks from behind him. His voice still sounds just the tiniest bit awkward, but for the most part, Knox can pick up on it holding its familiar, teasing timbre.

“That thing is going to beacon all the serial killers in the area to come and kill us.”

Knox clenches his jaw tightly, shaking his head.

“Shut up, I *got* this,” he tells him firmly, not tearing his eyes away from the screen to see if anything he did had an effect.

It didn’t.

A slight snicker comes from behind him, an indicator Charlie thinks Knox is full of shit, but when Knox turns his head to send Charlie an unimpressed look in retaliation he sees that Charlie isn’t smirking smugly at him but is instead trying to compose himself by staring down at his phone, an attempt that proves to be in vain because Knox can see the way Charlie’s smile is illuminated from both the light of his phone and the television.

Huffing slightly, Knox continues to button smash with the remote for a few more minutes until he gets frustrated and smacks the remote on the top of the television, causing the static to give way to the late-night news station for whatever small town they were in.

Satisfied, Knox walks over to his bed, fighting the childish temptation to turn and stick his tongue out at Charlie, and crawls underneath the covers.

The bed feels way too big and the sheets feel far too cold pressed up against him. All of the space makes Knox miss having Charlie here right next to him; makes him miss his smaller frame that still manages to be a strong and warm presence, who always manages to comfort Knox on even the most emotionally-taxing days at school or work just by curling up against him on their couch, or like he did last night back in Charlie’s childhood bedroom. He feels like he can’t ask Charlie to come over here right now, because he feels like he’d be too selfish if he did; Charlie didn’t have to owe Knox anything right now. What he probably needs is space.

So Knox just rolls onto his side facing Charlie’s side of the room, bringing the blankets in on himself as he tries distracting himself with the news, although every so often he finds his eyes drifting over to where Charlie is still sitting up with his back pressed against the bed frame, perusing through his Twitter feed.

The news in the town that they’re spending the night in- Putnam, Connecticut, Knox finds out after listening to one of the news anchors

bring up a story about a can drive one of the towns elementary schools is having- is pretty uneventful compared to most of the stuff Knox hears on news stations back at his apartment and or whenever he's back in New Haven over holiday breaks. The uneventfulness of it all is a nice change of pace; it makes it easy for him to submerge himself in this small town of almost seven thousand people and the events that make up their day-to-day lives.

Out of the two of them, Charlie ends up falling asleep first, during some cheesy, low-budget commercial advertising a car dealership in the nearby area, and as soon as he realizes Charlie is passed out asleep- sprawled on his stomach with one of his legs bent- Knox quietly gets out of his bed and creeps across the room so that he can turn off the television before he crawls back into his bed.

Without the television on, there's an almost deathly silence that fills the room that seeps into his bones and almost magnifies the loudness of Knox's thoughts as he rolls around aimlessly in his bed to try finding a comfortable sleeping position. After about ten minutes of rustling around, Knox gives up any of his efforts to fall asleep and just decides to flop down on his back.

He doesn't know how long he lays there, staring up at the popcorn ceiling as he tries to count as many bumps and sketchy looking stains in the ceiling as he could in the darkness of their room, but it feels like a fucking lifetime, that was for damn certain.

He misses being able to go to sleep easily and at a rational time. He also misses not being a complete lovesick idiot for a change like he had been this past August and September, but of course, leave it to Charlie Dalton of all people to pull him back into his old habitual routine.

Being in love was- in Knox's personal opinion- one of the greatest things about being alive; to find someone you want to spend every waking moment with, who you hold in the highest regard and care more about than yourself only to find that they feel the exact same way about you, is absolutely remarkable.

There's a reason why songs about love are always dominating the Billboard Top One Hundred and resonate the most with people; because love is something that is universal for everyone yet at the same time can take on various different forms. It's an experience everyone has in at least some sort of capacity or at least has a tiny bit of an understanding for. Even Meeks- who is asexual and aromantic-

has a deep appreciation for the people who he cares about, even if it isn't in the same way that Knox himself does. Love is something entirely embedded in connection; it creates something that's rare and precious that almost makes you become a part of the other person, to the point where you can feel as if you can speak and think through them and they'll be right in step with you.

But love is also something that can be incredibly frustrating at the same time.

Because when it comes down to it, love cannot be controlled, no matter how hard people go and try to fight it. Sometimes, you don't get to pick and choose the people who you are in love with, even if there are laws out in the world that try and contain it, and sometimes it pops up at the most inconvenient times, seemingly out of nowhere.

Which was exactly where he found himself with Charlie.

Much like tonight, there have been various times over the past few months where Knox has tried gaining an understanding of just how in-depth his feelings were for Charlie.

Knox is positive he's in love with Charlie; he knows that at the restaurant back in October while they were hanging out with Charlie's friends was when the realization that there was something more cultivating behind the scenes than just two guys pretending to date each other and how over a month-long period he's come to realize that Charlie is a person he is so far gone on that he cannot imagine his life without him in it. These things Knox is absolutely certain of.

But there are other things he isn't.

If he and Charlie hadn't started fake-dating because of running into Chris at the grocery store, would Knox have developed and come to realize what his feelings for Charlie actually were? Because if they hadn't run into Chris, Knox would've most likely continued to have been at least the slightest bit hung up on her until he eventually met someone else and could've possibly never thought of Charlie in a romantic nature without the correlation of associating him in a romantic way as he subconsciously came to do when they started this whole fake-dating fiasco in the first place.

Or if Knox hadn't met Chris back in his first week of freshman year during club rush, would something have naturally just developed between him and Charlie over time if Chris hadn't come into his life at all? He and Charlie are both bisexual, so it's a possibility, for sure.

And Knox *had* the sneaking suspicion that Charlie had flirted with him when they first met, but Knox never done anything back then because he never had any dating experience and was absolutely scared *shitless* of flirting with a guy because he was scared he could've possibly gotten beaten up for it.

All of it was a complete gamble, and there were roughly a million outcomes that could have come out of any of these scenarios. But when it came down to it at the end of the day, Knox was happy everything happened the way it did; because that way this was something that was meant to happen, and that there just needed to be the right build-up in order for him to stumble across it.

The longer Knox lays in bed contemplating, the more tangible his exhaustion seems to become,

and the last thing that ends up crossing Knox's mind before he passes out is the way Charlie had glanced down at Knox's lips in that fucking Rhode Island parking lot, and how Knox swears he had seen Charlie's eyes dilate the tiniest amount before he skittishly pulled away.

Knox wakes up the following morning to an already dressed and ready Charlie Dalton shaking his shoulder eagerly.

The jolting movements make Knox let out a loud whine as he tries to shift away from Charlie's hand in an attempt to grasp onto the last bits of sleep that's floating around his subconscious, but Charlie persists and reaches out to follow Knox's body and continues shaking him.

"Charlie, knock it off," he grumbles sleepily, making sure to scrunch his eyes tighter and to bury his head into the rough fabric of the pillowcase his head was resting on to get the message across to Charlie that he just wanted to sleep fucking *five more minutes* .

Eyes scrunching tighter or not, Charlie blatantly ignores Knox and continues to shake him. Because why would Charlie *ever* willingly go along with whatever any of his friends wanted him to do when he could relentlessly tease them instead?

"Hmmm, let me think," Charlie says mischievously, purposely pausing to give off the illusion that he was thinking his options over when in reality Knox knew Charlie had already made up his mind. This proves to be true as not even a full ten seconds go by before his complacent-sounding answer comes. " *No* ."

Knox lays there for God knows how long, trying to keep his body perfectly still in an act of defiance, and it's when Charlie's hand reaches down to Knox's hip and starts tasering him that Knox finally cracks and his eyes snap open.

"Charlie, I'm serious," he starts frustratedly. "If you don't knock it off I'm gonna fucking-" but whatever Knox is going to say dies completely in his throat, because it was at that moment when the black spots dancing across his vision fade away and his eyes have properly adjusted to the brightly-lit room.

Charlie's dressed in his last clean change of clothes he'd packed- a pair of skinny jeans, a sweatshirt, and a jean jacket that made him look like he came straight out of a Thrasher magazine- and was staring down at Knox with a little teasing smirk on his face, however, his smirk didn't have the same effect it usually did because his eyes were brimmed red, like he had just got done crying right before deciding to wake up Knox.

The observation immediately causes Knox to sit up.

"Charlie," he starts. "Are you- is everything okay?"

Charlie doesn't answer right away and Knox is panicked he's overstepped by asking. But then Charlie jerks his head in a way that means no, which-

It wasn't exactly a great sign, but Knox could tell by the expression on his face that Charlie was going to at least *talk* about it.

"I just got off the phone with my mother," he starts, and just the mention of his mother made Knox's jaw clench the tiniest bit. "She tried saying that everything that happened yesterday was just some 'grand misunderstanding' and that 'I was overreacting and taking things too far' but that she and my father were willing to forgive me and not financially cut me off if I transferred to Harvard next semester under a banking and finance major and broke up with you." Charlie rolls his eyes at the words, a *can you get a load of this bullshit?* kind of gesture. "I refused. I said I wouldn't break up with you and that I was staying at Columbia to finish out my bachelor's in teaching and that she wasn't going to intimidate me into changing my mind. So-" Charlie does a little half-hearted shrug. "She retracted the offer, we got into an argument, and she hung up."

Throughout the little retelling, Charlie sounded eerily passive, like the whole situation didn't seem to faze him.

Knox knows that being nonchalant about things was just Charlie's natural way of coping with things, so he knew that trying to push this further was going to be the equivalent of adding salt to a burning wound. But he had to be sure that Charlie was actually doing okay, so he lets out a sigh.

"Charlie, are you sure-"

"It's fine, I don't want to talk about it too much," Charlie cuts off, reaching forward to playfully flick at Knox's shoulder in his weird way of trying to play things off. With a quick wink, Charlie spins on his heels and starts heading across the room. "Now get your ass up, I got you something."

Knox frowns as he stares at Charlie's retreating figure.

"You- what?"

Whatever Charlie pulls out of his bag he purposely shields from Knox's line of sight as he turns around to fix Knox with a raised brow.

"For your birthday?" his eyes squint a little as he stares at Knox. "It *is* November 29th today, right?"

"No, no it is-" Knox rushes to say, pulling back the covers and maneuvering himself so he was now sitting cross-legged on the bed.

It was , Knox realizes, shocked. These past few days he had been so stressed about Charlie and Charlie's *parents* that he had completely forgotten about the fact that Friday- or, *today* - he was going to turn twenty-one. His birthday was something that hardly came across his mind, in general, these past few weeks. "I just-" Knox tries to form the right words in his mind that encapsulate how he feels, but then he realizes something and quickly pivots subjects. "You already got me something."

As he says the words, the cursed Yoko Ono vinyl and cantaloupe that Charlie had given him at the birthday party all of their friends had thrown for Knox the night before they left for Cape Cod pop into his mind. Then, he thinks about how Charlie had bought him dinner back at that restaurant and even committed himself to teaching Knox piano every morning under the guise of it 'being a birthday present.'

None of his friends- or *Chris,* for that matter- ever had spent this much money on Knox buying something for his birthday or ever put so much meticulous time and energy into each gift. It made Knox feel

warm inside that someone actually cared enough about him to want to do all of this stuff for him, but he mostly just felt an underlying sense of guilt that Charlie had gone and bought all of this stuff for him when Knox had never gone this above and beyond for him.

“Well, I got you something else,” Charlie says cryptically before sitting at the edge of Knox’s bed and holding out the present for Knox to take.

It’s a vinyl. Knox knows that it is right away as he takes the clumsily wrapped gift from Charlie’s hands, the tell being the square shape and just how thin it felt in his hands. Just staring at it made Knox’s stomach swoop excitedly as he turned the record over.

“I’m not gonna lie, Charlie, I’m impressed. You did a way better job wrapping this than usual,” Knox observes teasingly, biting the inside of his cheek to successfully smother a smile.

“Oh, for fucks sake, Knoxious, *open it* .”

Laughing, Knox does as he’s told and proceeds to rip off the red wrapping paper eagerly, excited to see whatever Charlie had gone out and bought him. However, he hates the overwhelming disappointment that sinks in the pit of his stomach as he stares down at the unwrapped vinyl in his hands. It’s not necessarily that Charlie had bought him another bad album, because Charlie *had* bought him Rubber Soul, which everyone knew to be Knox’s favorite Beatles album. It was just that this was a vinyl Knox already owns, being one of the few vinyls he had displayed up on a shelf in his room away from the rest of his moderately-sized collection.

Knox opens his mouth to comment on this fact, when he suddenly notices something that makes him lose the ability to speak and therefore almost makes him lose his fucking shit right on the spot.

Written across the front of the album were three names, and although the cursive was a little scribbled and the sharpie was a tiny bit chipped away due to age, Knox could make them out:

Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr.

Charlie got him a fucking signed Beatles record. A signed Beatles record with *George Harrison’s signature on it.*

This easily has got to be the most expensive gift anyone has ever bought him outside of the car his parents surprised him with on his

sixteenth birthday, and instantly, Knox thinks back to part of the conversation he overheard Charlie have with his father last night.

A five thousand dollar credit card bill, Charles, was the exact words he remembers hearing Charlie's father scold.

Knox had assumed Charlie just spent the money on weed or something. Maybe even a designer belt. Never in a million years did Knox ever consider that Charlie would have spent that much money on *him* . And now knowing one of the reasons Charlie's father had been so pissed at Charlie was because of something he had done for *Knox* was beginning to paint a more clear picture about why he'd gotten financially disowned.

The realization almost makes Knox drop the record to the floor, and suddenly he feels like he's about to throw up.

"Charlie, I- I cannot accept this," are the only words he's capable of getting out of his mouth.

"Why not?" Charlie asks, sounding so genuinely confused and looking so affronted that it's making Knox feel even *worse* .

"Charlie, this is- this is too much, I'm literally holding *rent* right now."

Charlie stares at him for a good ten seconds before he turns to stare down at his enclosed hands, letting out a long sigh.

" *That's* what you're worried about?" he asks tiredly.

"I didn't grow up in a wealthy family!" Knox exclaims helplessly, hating the way his voice cracks as a result of it coming out so high-pitched. He sighs, clearing his throat to try getting his voice to level out. "I'm not used to receiving expensive things from people, okay? I appreciate this, Charlie. I really, *really* do, but I don't know, I just feel *guilty* getting something this expensive."

"Why the hell would you feel *guilty* ?"

Somewhere in Knox's mind, he can tell that Charlie looks a tiny bit upset at the reaction Knox is having, but just seeing the expression on Charlie's face makes Kox huff.

"Because I feel like I'm gonna have to pay you back for this!"

“You don’t *have* to pay me back-” Charlie starts, but Knox is not having it.

“Yeah, I know you say that, but you probably spent a couple *thousand dollars* on this, and it’s way more than anything I ever spent on you and-”

“It was four thousand,” Charlie corrects easily- a little *too* easily for Knox’s comfort- and Knox just about has a conniption on the fucking *spot* .

“ *What?* ” he asks, his voice coming out at a whisper.

“The vinyl was four thousand dollars, not a couple.”

And that was-

That was *not* something Knox needed to know. Because now that revelation was making him think back on every single birthday or Christmas gift he had gotten Charlie and made them all feel completely *insignificant* in comparison to this. Nothing Knox had ever bought Charlie in the past could come close to this. Fuck, nothing Knox would buy Charlie in the future ever *would* come close to it.

There’s a lot of things he wants to do right now- cry, go back to sleep and never wake up again, tackle Charlie into a tight hug and kiss him for being such a complete dumb ass- but all Knox is capable of doing is letting out a slightly hysterical peal of laughter as he turns his attention down at the vinyl in his hands so he doesn’t have to stare directly at Charlie. He rubs his thumb gently along the trademark star Ringo incorporates in his signature, completely transfixed.

“I don’t deserve it,” Knox tells him, his voice barely coming out above a whisper.

He doesn’t look up when he feels the bed dip, so when he suddenly feels Charlie’s right shoulder press up against his left it makes Knox startle a tiny bit, but he still keeps his eyes trained downward because he’s scared of what he’s going to do if he looks up.

“Yeah, you do,” Charlie replies, oddly soft, and he makes a point of nudging his knee against Knox’s.

“I don’t want to come off as being ungrateful or anything,” Knox goes on. “But- *why?* You could’ve literally bought me anything else that *wasn’t* over a thousand dollars.” More quietly, he adds, “The piano

lessons would've been enough."

"I didn't buy this for you because I wanted to flaunt the price tag to you or anything," Charlie says. "I bought it because I thought it would've been the perfect gift. It would've shown that I *cared* , Knox."

At that Knox looks up to see Charlie is already staring directly at him, his expression almost determined as his eyes flicker over Knox's face.

His words aren't spoken in some dismissive, offhanded kind of way. There's *weight* behind them; implications that make Knox's heart accelerate in his chest and his stomach twist like he was at the top of a rollercoaster and was staring directly down at the ground from hundreds of feet in the air.

Knox knows this conversation has taken a drastically serious tone, that Charlie is laying his heart on the line and bearing it for Knox to prick and prod at so he should really be careful with his next words.

Be honest , he thinks. *You just need to be honest* .

But instead, Knox does what he does best whenever he finds himself in these sorts of situations; he panics and pivots the subject entirely.

"Do you even know if these signatures are real or not?" he asks, turning the vinyl so it's facing Charlie and practically shoving it closer to him so he can get a good look at it. "Forgers go fucking feral for this kind of thing."

Charlie stares at him for a few seconds before a slightly astonished-sounding laugh escapes him.

"I- no, honestly. I mean, they sent a little authenticity certificate from a third party that seemed pretty legit-"

"That isn't very promising," Knox blurts and for whatever reason that makes Charlie burst out into a fit of more genuine sounding laughter, reaching out a hand and slapping Knox's shoulder as he does so.

Knox smiles a tiny bit to try covering up the way his heart clenches at the sound of his laughter and the guilt that's still clouding in the back of his mind.

They check out of the motel as soon as Knox showers and gets ready- which is around nine-thirty- and Knox is relieved when he steps

outside of their room to see that the weather conditions have improved considerably since last night.

Overhead the sun was blinding and there wasn't a single snowflake in sight, a complete juxtaposition to how the weather had been the night before.

The receptionist who is working behind the counter this morning is not the same girl who was working last night, a sketchy middle-aged man who Knox would've expected to be working in a motel like this taking her place instead. This receptionist strikes Knox as a practical person, cold and all business, but nonetheless still managed to give Knox the fucking creeps.

The check-out process was almost antagonizingly slow and as soon as Knox got the go-ahead to be able to leave, he all but sprinted out of the lobby.

Charlie- who had been leaning up against the wall outside waiting for Knox- pushes himself off the wall as soon as he sees Knox come out.

"If you didn't come out of there in five minutes, I was about to go in for back up," he says, quickly falling into step with Knox as they head towards his car. "That guy looks like the type of person who might've hate-crimed you."

Knox scoff-laughs.

"I'm serious," Charlie insists, climbing into the passenger seat of the car and kicking his foot up on the dashboard. "There was something really fucking off about that guy."

"Thanks for wanting to come and defend my honor and all, but it looks like I'm not going to need your services today," Knox says, hooking up his phone to the aux cord as inconspicuously as he possibly could.

When catching onto what Knox was doing, a mortified look comes across Charlie's face.

"Oh no," he's quick to say. "No, no, *no* . I am *not* listening to your shit; I listened to it the entire way to my parent's house and to the motel. I am *not* listening to it on the ride home. This is where I draw the fucking *line* ."

Knox smirks and raises his phone, pointedly shaking it in the air.

“It’s my birthday, remember?” he asks, and laughs at the annoyed huff it makes Charlie do. “Also, I thought you said to your mother that, and I quote: ‘My music taste was growing on you.’”

Charlie grumbles something under his breath that distinctly sounds like ‘fucking bullshit’ but he doesn’t put up much of a fight as Knox brings up his car playlist before pulling out of the parking lot.

Charlie frowns a tiny bit as he listens to the song, his lips pursing slightly and it makes Knox reach out blindly to crank up the volume so Charlie could hear the version of ‘Please Mr. Postman’ that was playing from the speakers better.

“Mamas and Papas?” Charlie tries after a few minutes, a hopeful lilt in his voice.

“Carpenters,” Knox corrects with a teasing smile. “You disappoint me.”

Charlie rolls his eyes good-naturedly.

“Not too bad of a guess, considering I mainly listen to Machine Gun Kelly and Kendrick Lamar.”

“You listen to Led Zeppelin and Queen a lot,” Knox is quick to point out lightly.

“Cause Led Zeppelin and Queen are actually *good* ,” Charlie retorts, his fighting words causing a full-fledged debate to break out about who had better music taste. The debate ends up carrying them all the way to the little hole-in-the-wall diner across town that Charlie had found on google and suggested they should go eat at.

It looks like a set straight out of a fifties film, Knox notes as they step inside and are guided to a cracked, plastic booth located in the corner of the restaurant by a smiling old lady who had her gray hair pinned tightly to the back of her head. She seemed nice enough on the surface, starting up small-talk with the both of them as they wove their way through the maze of tables and all of the elderly people occupying them. But much like the employee back at the motel, all of the disconcerting looks he and Charlie were receiving made Knox feel uncomfortable, giving him the sort of feeling that he and Charlie last night accidentally stumbled into a real-life equivalent of West View, where there was something way more ominous going on than what met the eye.

Knox kept up the kind, respectable tourist facade while the old woman continued to amiably talk to them, but the second she turned her back on them and headed for the kitchen to get their drinks, Knox quickly leaned forward to fix Charlie with an anxious look.

“I don’t mean to sound superstitious or anything when I say this,” he starts, pausing a second so he can crane his head to see if he can catch anyone in the act of doing anything remotely shady. They’re not, but Knox wouldn’t put it past them to do something the second he blinks. “But there is *definitely* some pod-people kind of shit going on around here behind the scenes.”

Out of his peripheral, Knox can see Charlie reaching for two menus that were sitting in the holder along the wall and gently nudges Knox’s hand with one before opening his own, flipping right to the breakfast page and staring down at it intently, a ghost of a smile curling along the corners of his mouth.

“As long as these pod-people can make a mean ass short stack, I don’t give a *fuck* about what they’re doing around here,” he says, which doesn’t alleviate any of Knox’s anxieties at *all* .

The laminated menu Charlie hands him is sticky with *God knows what* and Knox rubs his fingers against the thighs of his jeans in a feeble attempt to get off whatever residue is on them as he glances down at the faded black and white pictures of omelets and waffles. In the background, The Beach Boys’ ‘Help Me Rhonda’ plays through the crackling static of the speakers, only feeding into the late fifties/early sixties aesthetic the restaurant was trying to give off while at the same time cementing Knox’s certainties that Wanda Maximoff was going to barge in through one of the windows and start mind-controlling him into never wanting to leave town.

When the waitress comes to deliver their coffees and take their orders, Knox just asks for a Spinach feta omelet with a Texas toast before he slumps over and presses his cheek up against his bicep, staring up through his limp bangs at Charlie while he orders.

He looks ridiculously soft with the white Carhartt beanie he had put on in the car, his hair sticking out at weird angles from underneath. It makes Knox want to do something incredibly stupid, like lace his fingers through Charlie’s or to lean across the tabletop to reel him into a soft kiss, but he isn’t entirely certain that doing either of those things in a diner full of conservative-looking old people wouldn’t have been the greatest place to do it. *Or* that doing so wouldn’t be stepping

over the ‘being a supportive friend’ role Knox is trying to build up for himself in these following weeks moving forward.

“Are we going to talk about it?” he ends up asking, instead.

Charlie- who had taken a drink out of the ceramic mug of coffee the waitress had given him- smacks his lips and gives Knox a confused look as he slowly sets his mug down.

“Our financials,” Knox clarifies. “What we’re going to be doing these upcoming months about rent.”

An almost pained expression crosses Charlie’s face as he winces a tiny bit and for a moment Knox feels guilty about putting it there. But this was a conversation they *needed* to have; they needed to figure out moving forward just what the hell they were going to do, because like Charlie said yesterday, his parents were no longer going to offer them the financial aid that they’ve been relying on for their rent since they moved in. Their rent for this month was already covered, but the deadline for when they had to pay for their rent in December was rapidly approaching. They needed a game plan, and they needed one *fast* .

“Can we please wait until tomorrow to talk about this?” Charlie asks, sounding exhausted.

Knox frowns a tiny bit.

“Charlie, you know we-” Knox starts.

“Let me finish,” Charlie cuts him off brusquely. Feeling sheepish, Knox slowly closes his mouth. The little smug look of victory that crosses Charlie’s face at the action doesn’t go unnoticed by Knox. “I know I come up with excuses to not talk about this kind of shit because it makes me uncomfortable. I *know* that and I’m not pretending that you don’t know me well enough to know that, either. But today’s your birthday and nobody deserves to put up with this much emotional baggage on a day that’s *supposed* to be centered around them. Besides, us waiting to talk about our shitty financial situation one day is not gonna get us evicted, is it?”

Knox lets out a long sigh, seeing Charlie’s point and also so exhausted by all the arguing that they’ve been doing that he finds he doesn’t have much fight left in him anymore.

“Yeah,” he concedes. “Yeah, it can wait.”

Charlie raises his chin at Knox, clearly pleased and Knox mirrors the action and soon one simple head movement turns into a staring contest that Knox is fucking *determined* to win.

“You’re gonna blink first,” Knox says, resting his chin in his palm. “Just quit while you’re ahead, Dalton.”

“Not on my fucking life, Knoxious,” Charlie retorts cockily, widening his eyes comically at him in a way that almost makes Knox burst out laughing.

They continue staring until Knox feels his eyes starting to burn and water up in the corners, but even then he doesn’t tear his eyes away because he doesn’t want to give Charlie the satisfaction. The only thing that manages to abruptly cut their pissing contest short, however, is when the waitress arrives back at their table with their food.

Charlie raises his eyebrows pointedly at Knox before he focuses his attention downward and starts cutting into the giant stack of pancakes he ordered, and Knox goes on to watch in amazement as Charlie starts digging into his food, always finding a way of putting away more food than his lithe frame suggested.

Knox eats at a more moderate pace, unable to tear his eyes away from Charlie the entire time and when he finishes eating nothing except for the crusts of his toast remain on his plate, which he tosses onto Charlie’s small plate he has his side of extremely overcooked bacon. He had said while he was ordering he wanted his bacon to practically be cremated, and it definitely seems that the cooks delivered.

“Pig,” Knox scolds fondly.

“Sleeping in shitty motels and officially getting financially disowned by my parents works up an appetite,” Charlie deadpans, and Knox tries his hardest not to flinch at the joke. “Also, only the weak don’t eat their crusts.”

As if proving some type of point, Charlie picks up one of the limp crusts and points it at Knox before taking an obnoxious bite out of it.

Knox heaves himself out of the booth with a roll of his eyes.

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom. I can’t handle being subjected to this blatant abuse any longer.”

As he turns around, Knox can hear Charlie let out a loud laugh, the kind Knox knows makes Charlie throw his head back.

“Not my fault you’re the front runner for the Darwin Award of the week!” Charlie hollers after him around a mouthful of food. “Natural selection is coming for you!”

Knox flips Charlie off over his shoulder at the comment, and he tries to ignore the way Charlie’s laughter grows tenfold when Knox almost runs face-first into one of the waitresses who was running out a steaming tray of food.

When Knox comes out of the bathroom, the first thing he notices is that the waitress had cleared away all of their dishes with the exception of their coffee mugs, which Knox dutily notes have been refilled.

The second was that there was a slice of pumpkin pie that most definitely had not been there when Knox had gotten up.

Knox flicks his eyes towards the man responsible, only to find he’s staring up at Knox with a look of faux-innocence on his face, his chin resting in his palm as he grins lazily.

“Did you know this place has free birthday dessert?” he asks conversationally as Knox collapses into the booth across from him, not even waiting for Knox to fully settle down before pouncing on him.

“I didn’t,” Knox tells him with a small grin, deciding to play along with whatever bit Charlie had pre-established while he was gone. “It’s a good thing you took this place up on this very dire matter.”

“You gotta exploit capitalism whenever you can,” Charlie hums. “It wouldn’t have been very Charlie Dalton-esque if I wouldn’t have.”

“I’m proud,” Knox says warmly. “It’s very eating the rich of you, indeed.” he slides the spare spoon across the table in offering, and Charlie quickly takes him up on it and grabs the spoon before they dig in.

Knox has to practically swallow down the loud moan that bubbles in his throat when he tastes the pie for the first time.

The pie at this place was fucking *phenomenal* . Well it wasn’t enough to give his mother a run for her money, it was definitely good enough to the point where it could warrant some sweat from her. Judging

from the slightly blissed expression that comes across Charlie's face, he was feeling the exact same way.

Knox wants to say the universal 'thank you' that almost anybody would whenever a friend does something considerate for them, but a question pops in his head that makes him backpedal from that route. "You remembered my favorite pie was pumpkin?"

Charlie nods his head, shoveling his forkful of pie into his mouth. There's a little whip cream and crumbs from the gram cracker crust of the pie at the corner of his mouth, and Knox hates how his eyes zero in on the way the tip of Charlie's tongue peaks out to swipe it away.

"Of course I did," he says, his voice taking on an indescribable tone to it "How could I forget?"

The metaphorical question takes Knox completely off guard, but he doesn't entirely know how he was supposed to even *respond* to that so he just swallows thickly and averts his eyes downward.

An almost awkward silence settles upon them as they continue to eat their way through the slice of pie. When they were about halfway through it, Charlie looks up at him.

"So while you were in the bathroom, I was thinking-" he starts, and while Charlie is trying his hardest to come across as casual, Knox knows him too well at this point to know that this wasn't going to be some little offhand plan he had in mind. There was *intent* behind it.

"Oh Jesus Christ, okay," Knox says with a shake of his head, unable to conceal the laughter that seeps into his voice. "You were thinking *what* , exactly?"

"Well, *Putnam* , *Connecticut* isn't exactly the most. . . *thrilling* place to spend your *twenty-first* birthday, is it not?" Charlie asks.

Knox frowns, having no idea whatsoever about where the hell Charlie was taking this.

Charlie takes Knox's silence as a cue to continue.

"A little shrinky dink town, where the population isn't even at ten thousand people is *not* suitable enough for the likes of two young, thrill-seeking college students to spend your *twenty-first birthday*- "

"Charlie-" Knox starts to laugh.

“It would be fucking *criminal* if we spent your *twenty-first birthday* playing bingo and solitaire with the fucking old people who are hovering around this joint-”

“Oh my god, just get to the point already,” Knox groans, which quickly melts into a loud wheeze.

“How do you feel about taking a detour and visiting Bethel on our way back to our apartment?”

Honestly, out of all the possible responses Knox had been anticipating, that had to be the most anticlimactic one. Because what the *fuck* even is Bethel?

“ *Bethel* ?” he asks incredulously.

“I thought you were the history major, sixties music junkie out of the two of us,” Charlie rolls his eyes good-naturedly, as if he can’t believe Knox is being entirely serious right now. He begins fiddling with the napkin that’s sticking out of the little dispenser on their table while he’s talking, a clear act of nerves. “It’s where Woodstock happened.”

Knox’s lips part in astonishment as he stares at Charlie, completely at a loss for words.

“I mean, we don’t *have* to go,” Charlie starts when Knox doesn’t immediately reply, obviously taking the silence as a negative reaction. “We could always just head right home, or-”

“No, no, no, I *want* to go,” Knox rushes to answer, because *holy shit, he might be going to the town where Woodstock happened* . “I just. . . I thought you didn’t like my oldies shit?”

“Not *all* of it is terrible,” Charlie says, as if he *wasn’t* the person who made the point of bitching about Knox getting free reign over the music on their way over here. “Hendrix and Janis Joplin are pretty cool.” He pauses for a second, considering. “Besides, not all of us can be history majors to appreciate the cultural impact something had, you know.”

There’s a quirk to his mouth as he speaks, so Knox knows there’s no real heat behind it.

“I feel like I might get where you’re coming from with that,” Knox says with a tiny smile of his own.

Shortly after Knox speaks the waitress comes back to their table asking if they're going to be on one check or separate ones and after they both say they're going to be on the same one Charlie makes a reach for the credit card in his wallet at the same time Knox is reaching for his.

The two of them stare at each other for a moment, in a way that makes Knox think that from an outsider's perspective they looked like Angel Eyes and Blondie in the final standoff scene in *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* , before Knox beats Charlie to the punch and slides his credit card over to the waitress before Charlie gets the chance to, the waitress sending him a polite smile as she walks away with the check.

Charlie gives Knox an accusing glare the second she turns away from them.

" *What?"* Knox demands sharply.

"You don't have to do this, you know," Charlie says, doing a little gesture with his hands. "Pitying me, or whatever the hell it is you're doing right now. I could've paid."

Knox lets out a long breath. "I'm not pitying you," he says, which earns him a flat look from Charlie.

"I'm not!" he insists. He opens his mouth to further explain when the waitress comes back with his card. After Knox signs his signature and writes down a six-dollar tip on the bill, the waitress wishes them a good day- and a happy birthday to Knox- before rushing off to another one of her tables, clearly pleased by the tip Knox left her.

Charlie purses his lips a tiny bit as his eyes scan over Knox's face, seemingly trying to get a read on him, before he slowly nods his head.

"Okay," he murmurs quietly, the fight he had noticeably fading away. "Okay."

Knox's shoulders instantly relax at the understanding he hears in Charlie's voice and offers Charlie a small smile before they head out of the restaurant.

"For the fucking love of God, Knox, can we *please* skip all of the Ravi Shankar and Zakir Hussain songs!?" Charlie complains about a good forty-five minutes into their drive, his complaint being so loud that it

causes Knox to slightly jostle the wheel a little in his state of surprise.

In an attempt to 'get in the mood' about heading out to the Woodstock site, Knox had found and queued up a twenty-four-hour long Spotify playlist someone had made that had every single song that played at the three-day music festival in chronological order.

Knox had *thought* it would've been fun to pass the time, listening to the setlist and geeking out with Charlie about all of the lesser-known facts of the event that have been ingrained in his head since he was twelve and his father would excitedly rant about Woodstock to him when figuring out Knox liked the same type of music that he did. Hell, even Charlie had seemed a little bit excited by Knox's idea, which absolutely thrilled him since their differences in music taste was one of the main areas of conflict in their friendship.

And Charlie *had* been excited, drumming his fingers against his thigh to the beat of whatever song played through the speakers, a smile on his face and Ray-Bans concealing eyes that Knox knew were crinkling at the corners.

But then the Ravi Shankar and his sitar instrumentals came on and all bets were off.

Knox purses his lips, giving Charlie as unimpressed of a look as he can manage from out of the corner of his eye when he feels his heart rate decelerate to a more constant rhythm after Charlie's sudden outburst.

"Why?"

"Cause it's nothing but sitar instrumental," Charlie says, like it's self-explanatory. "If the songs were two minutes each I wouldn't really have a problem with it, but each one of these fucking songs is over *ten minutes long* . If there's one more song left in the setlist I swear to God, I'm jumping out of the car or something."

Knox clenches his jaw slightly, his made already made up.

"I'm not turning it off," Knox says decisively.

If Charlie didn't look like he wanted to flee from the car before, he *definitely* wanted to now.

"Why *not?* "

Knox flushes a tiny bit. "Because this is the order they had to listen to

the music at Woodstock," he says defensively. "So that is the order we're going to be listening to this playlist in the car on the way there."

"Oh my god, I don't *believe* you right now," Charlie groans loudly, slumping against the passenger window over-dramatically. "This is *torture* ."

"You'll survive," Knox says, reaching out to give a faux-sympathetic tap on Charlie's knees.

Just as Knox retracts his hand from Charlie's knee, another Shankar song starts up and Charlie's groans of misery grow *louder* .

He does end up giving Charlie a free skip pass when Knox finds out that there's a Ravi Shankar song on the playlist that's almost an hour long, because as much as Knox doesn't want to admit it, there's only so much sitar instrumental and bongo drum solos a person can listen to without feeling completely worn down.

Will he ever admit this out loud to Charlie?

Hell no.

But does Charlie probably know?

Knox has a sneaking suspicion that he does.

There's a lot of expectations Knox had built up in his head about the town where Woodstock took place.

Based on retellings from his father and documentaries, Knox had always come to think of the town as larger than life, somewhere that takes your breath away just by *looking* at it.

In reality, however, Bethel, New York is a place that on the surface reminds Knox of every other small town in New England that he's visited; quaint, filled with kind and smiling faces, but still holding with it the same amount of charm that always managed to pique Knox's city-born roots.

Unassuming or not, the *history* that took place here outweighs all of that; the impact on the counterculture movement and music and general makes Knox take in every stop sign and small house he drives by with an almost child-like wonder.

While the town only has a population of about four thousand people, Knox still ends up getting lost since he's never visited here before and at first he completely ignores Charlie's offers of typing in the address of the Bethel Woods- the performing arts center built right on the land the festival had taken place- but after twenty minutes of helplessly driving around, he has Charlie punch in the address into Google Maps and turn off the music on his Spotify so Knox can hear the directions better.

After going down a series of winding, heavily wooded roads Knox finally finds the building in question, and right as he's about to pull into the parking lot Charlie points towards a road that branches off a little ways away from the building.

"Pull over on the side of the road up there," is all Charlie gives as an explanation and Knox immediately finds himself turning on his directional and doing exactly what Charlie says.

He's almost positive at this point if Charlie asked him to walk off a cliff or to become a hitman, he'd do it without thinking too hard about it.

"Alright, Nuwanda," Knox says as soon as he shuts the car off, turning towards Charlie with a grin. "What now?"

" *Now* , we're gonna go check out this bitch," Charlie says, raising his glasses to send a wink at Knox before unbuckling his seatbelt and walking down the road.

Knox stares after him for a few moments, struck dumb, before his mind catches up to his body and he forces himself to get out of the car and catch up with him.

'This bitch' as Charlie had referred it to, ends up being a monument marker located along the side of the road a little ways away from where they had parked.

As they come to a stop right in front of it, he turns and see's Charlie is now standing next to him, trying his hardest to catch his breath.

"Fuck you walk fast, you fucking giraffe," he pants.

Even though he has sunglasses shielding his eyes, Knox has the sneaking suspicion that Charlie is glaring at him right now. He sends Charlie a little smirk in reply.

“Not my fault you have little legs,” he says, and lets out a loud shriek of laughter as he avoids the hand Charlie attempts to swat at him with.

Silence takes over them as they take in the view.

“It’s a field,” Knox blurts out unintelligently.

“No *shit* it’s a field, Knoxious,” Charlie laughs. “What, were you expecting this place to look like fucking *Coachella?* With a Ferris wheel and palm trees and swimming pools?”

“Well, *no* -” Knox attempts to defend himself, blushing. “It’s just- it’s winter. We’re just staring at a snow-covered field.”

That’s when the plaque catches his eye; he walks towards it. When he reaches the marker he takes in the plaque like it’s the fucking holy grail.

After Charlie brushes away the snow covering the top of it, Knox can make out a little sculpture of a white bird sitting on a distinguished color neck of a guitar- the dove of peace. Underneath the little sculpture, on adjacent sides of the site marker, was the setlist of some of the musicians who played the event; The Grateful Dead, Joe Cocker, CCR, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix being some of the most influential.

There’s still some snow that Charlie hadn’t managed to clear away so Knox reaches out to bat it away, which reveals the words:

This is the original site of The Woodstock

Music and Arts Fair

Held on Aug. 15, 16, 17, 1969

This marker is erected by the owners
Louis Nicky and June Gelish

1984

“Pfft, erected,” Charlie snickers loudly after they stand in silence for a few minutes and Knox has to physically restrain himself from tipping

his head back and letting out a loud groan.

-

From the monument marker, they walk all the way to the performing arts building where the museum is located and while the walk isn't necessarily a far one- most likely a mile, tops- by the time Knox and Charlie step inside, Knox is almost certain he has lost the capability of feeling anything in his toes.

As they come to stand in front of the box office, Knox goes to reach into his wallet but Charlie pointedly elbows him in the side, which stops him in his tracks.

"It's only sixteen dollars, I can get it," Charlie says offhandedly, reaching into his own back pocket to pull out an expensive-looking black wallet. "You spent money on breakfast and the hotel."

"You bought me a four thousand dollar record that you have no idea has the *real* signed signatures of three of the Beatles on it," Knox points out. "I think this is the least I can do."

He makes a reach for his card but Charlie- ever the more stubborn out of the two of them- manages to grab his before Knox and hands it to the old man sitting behind the ticket booth.

His card ends up declining, which Knox had a sinking suspicion about happening, so Charlie just pulls a fifty out of his wallet and tells the employee to keep the change' before ushering Knox towards the elevator that would lead to the exhibit downstairs.

The museum turns out to be absolutely *amazing* .

Formally known to the public as 'The Story of the Sixties and Woodstock,' Knox feels as if the museum perfectly encapsulates the title; all throughout there are vintage artifacts from the sixties, ranging from rooms replicated with furniture from the time period to actual Volkswagen slug bugs and busses parked throughout the museum, bright painted psychedelic patterns covering every expanse of the vehicles.

There's black-light art galleries filled with paintings of famous sixties musicians and anti-war propaganda posters, and a giant walk-through timeline cataloging all of the major events that took place throughout the decade. There's even a section dedicated to the 'Commercialization of the Beatles' that's filled with all sorts of Beatles-

themed merchandise that came out at the time, from ukuleles to hair spray to even wigs that claimed to be authentic Beatles haircuts.

Knox really likes that section, however, the exhibit kind of got ruined for him when Charlie turned to him and asked Knox in a dead-serious tone if he owned the Beatles lunchbox that was in the display case when he was in elementary school.

His favorite part of the museum ends up being an area called the Exhibition Gallery; a giant room filled floor to ceiling with photos of people at Woodstock and quotes from attendees and residents of Bethel, New York at the time.

It just blew this mind that these people all got to experience such a big historical event for themselves and not even come to realize the impact it had on the country moving forward. Thinking too hard about these sorts of things often made Knox wonder about all of the historical events he was going to live through during *his* lifetime; the events that he would get to experience first hand and not think much about it at the time but that future generations were going to look back and discuss . He's not entirely sure if these are thoughts most people contemplate every once in a while when they're unable to fall asleep at night or if it's just Knox being a giant history nerd.

On more than one occasion, Knox finds himself turning to Charlie, grinning widely as he excitedly points out certain artifacts or aspects of the museum that he finds fascinating, *definitely* drawing unwanted attention on himself from other people pursuing around the room, but Charlie doesn't seem to care about that too much. Instead, he just nods along to whatever Knox rants about with a secretive smile on his face, whether it's Knox saying for the twentieth time about just how much his father would *love* this place or if it's about random tidbits of knowledge that pop into his head.

"Richie Havens had to start singing Beatles songs a few hours after he was supposed to be done playing because Sweetwater was supposed to be the first act but they ended up getting stuck in traffic," Knox says at one point, right as they were getting ready to leave.

"You told me this already, Knoxious," Charlie scolds, sounding far-too amused for Knox to take the words all that seriously. "But the reminder is nice to hear. It'll make sure the fact sticks in my head."

When it comes time for them to actually leave, Charlie has to drag Knox towards the elevator away from the wall that detailed all the

musicians who played at Woodstock at the start of the exhibit, and Knox thinks distantly as the elevator door closes in front of him that feeling Charlie stand so close to him, his fingers intertwined with Knox's has got to be one of the best feelings in the world.

For dinner, they stop at a Woodstock-themed pizza and deli restaurant where they served pizzas with pepperoni's arranged into the shape of a peace sign and had burgers with peace signs seared into the buns.

They take their food to go, since they both decided back at the museum on eating in a parking lot of a nearby state park so they could watch the sunset on the hood of Knox's car, and right as they were leaving the restaurant, Charlie halts.

"This is the ugliest shirt I've ever fucking seen," he declares loudly, holding up one of the shirts that was in the hippie-themed convenience store attached to the restaurant so Knox could catch a better look at it. It was an obnoxious tie-dyed shirt with a cartoon guitar that had the quote

"'three days of peace, music and. . . love' superimposed over the neck of the guitar. "I need it."

"Charlie, I'm not sure this is the safest budgeting move to make right now?" Knox says hesitantly as he peers down at the price tag, although his voice comes out as more of a question. "Because I don't think spending almost forty dollars on a tie-dye *Woodstock* t-shirt is going to help us pay our bills."

"Oh come on, Knoxious, this is a *treasure* ," Charlie whines. " *Look at it* . I'm pretty sure if we offer this to the landlord instead of rent, he'd take it no questions asked."

"Would you even *wear* this?"

"Every single day," Charlie vows. "I want to be *buried* in this bad boy."

Knox lets out a long, exasperated sigh of defeat.

"If I say yes to you getting this, can you promise me to not wear it whenever we go out in public?" he asks, and the ridiculously endearing smile that spreads across Charlie's face at that has Knox handing his credit card over to Charlie without thinking too much about it before heading out to his car with the food.

As it turns out, leaving Charlie alone with Knox's credit card was a miscalculation on his part, because when Charlie clambers into the passenger seat of the car, Knox notices that Charlie is carrying a cup holder with four styrofoam to-go cups full of God knows what and a giant plastic bag that is way too massive to only be holding the one t-shirt that Charlie had wanted.

"Charlie, what the hell did you go and buy in there?" Knox asks, eyeing the bag Charlie had thrown next to his feet accusingly.

"I am *so* glad you asked," Charlie smirks, handing Knox's credit card over to him jovially. "I got us each a local draft beer that sounded good and then some strawberry daiquiri's, cause I know you have a more *unrefined* drinking pallet than I do."

Knox scowls.

"My drinking pallet is not ' *unrefined* ,'" he hisses defensively, choosing to ignore the blank-faced look he receives in return. "Also, isn't it a bit irresponsible of me to drink and drive?"

"We're not gonna be drinking while you drive, dipshit," Charlie says, though the insult contains no heat. "I got these for when we ate, cause it would be an absolute abomination if I at least didn't get you a *little* drunk while you were in my presence today. My slutty bisexual party crown would have to get revoked."

Knox flushes a tiny bit at hearing Charlie calling himself the 'slutty bisexual' and he tries to draw attention from his flushing cheeks by dipping his eyes down towards the plastic bag.

"You wanna elaborate what's in the bag?" he asks, nodding his head towards the item in question.

Charlie smirks a tiny bit at him, shaking his head.

"I don't really think that's necessary," he starts. "Cause I know you'll get on my ass about it and-"

"Let me see the damn bag, Charlie."

Charlie tries to reach down for the bag but Knox manages to snatch it before he had the chance to grab at it, letting out a high-pitched whining sound when Knox leans as far away from Charlie as he possibly could to peer into the contents of the bag. To Knox's complete and utter horror, he comes across-

“Are you- can you tell me why you fucking went and bought *two* of these things?” he asks, holding up the wretched Woodstock T-shirt towards Charlie, aghast.

“They had one in your size!” Charlie yells defensively.

“That didn’t mean I would *want one* .”

Charlie lets out a noise of offense that Knox ignores in favor of continuing to rifle through the bag. Charlie had gotten some Woodstock and Janis Joplin pins, along with a Woodstock ticket fridge magnet that was actually pretty cool, but like *hell* was Knox going to acknowledge any of those things when Charlie also got a ceramic hippie van plate that he had stuck at the bottom of the bag, as if he thought sticking it there wasn’t going to make Knox come across it.

“Why?” he asks Charlie, taking the ceramic plate out and waving it in front of his face. “Fucking *why?”*

“It was the last one!” Charlie tugs the plate out of Knox’s hands, cradling the thing as if it was his own child. “Now get your clumsy hands off, I don’t want you dropping it.”

“Do I even want to *know* how much you spent on it?”

“That is a secret between me and your credit card bill,” is all Charlie says vaguely and the dark scowl that overtakes Knox’s face sends him into a pealing fit of laughter that Knox drowns out with whatever Hendrix song is playing on the Woodstock playlist.

There are no other cars when Knox pulls into the parking lot of Lake Superior state park, so he gets free reign on where to park and is able to find a spot that perfectly overlooks the lake.

The sky is already breathtaking and is in the beginning stages of what Knox is almost certain is going to be an incredible sunset, so he can’t help the fact that barely a few seconds after he puts his car into park he rushes out of his car and heads around to the trunk to get out the giant stack of blankets he always kept there for these kinds of nights, leaving Charlie to stare after him with a confused expression on his face.

Watching the sunset on the hood of Knox’s car became a little tradition for himself since returning back to New Haven the summer after his sophomore year of college, one of the distractions that truly

helped him in getting over his breakup with Chris.

He had made the point of heading out every day, even on ones where the weather had been absolute shit, his sister Rebecca and her boyfriend always eager participants who went with him about ninety-nine percent of the time. Most of the time they would just park in weird places around New Haven; the top of downtown car garages or out in the parking lot Lighthouse Point Park, but once every blue moon Knox would drive to the edges of town where there wasn't as much light pollution so they could catch a better glimpse of the stars once the sun had gone down.

Getting the opportunity to introduce Charlie to this little pass time he's come to value, while completely mundane for most people to do with their friends, made Knox feel strangely vulnerable, but when he came around to the front end of the car and seen Charlie standing with their food, an almost fond expression on his face as he watches Knox's eagerness, makes all of his fears dissipate.

"Knox, I don't mean to sound like I'm fat-shaming or anything, but there is no way and hell the both of us are going to be able to fit on the hood of your car without breaking it."

Knox laughs jovially, rolling his eyes.

"We won't, I've done this before," he reassures simply as he spreads out one of the blankets across the car. He throws the other one at Charlie's face and laughs as he watches Charlie fumble with it while also trying to balance the to-go cups and the bag that has their food in it. "My car's a piece of shit but at least it's a *durable* piece of shit when it comes to this."

"Why, you take Chris out on a bunch of romantic star-gazing dates?" Charlie asks lazily.

He knows the question was meant to be an innocent, almost teasing one, but it still left Knox feeling uncomfortable and unable to come up with an overly witty comeback.

"Nah," he finally says, brushing off some ice that hadn't quite melted on Knox's windshield before clambering up onto the car. "I would go out a lot this past summer with some friends from high school or my sister and her boyfriend and be the most awkward third wheel in existence."

Charlie snickers a tiny bit at that, hazardously tossing the bag of food

up next to Knox before he himself attempts to get on the hood as well.

The car shakes a little bit as they both try getting comfortable and eventually they figure out a system where they both can lay back against the windshield of the car with their food spread out between them.

“Fuck!” Knox curses when he accidentally nudges a box of food with his thigh as he tries to bring the blanket he had closer in on himself, and his to-go box of chicken tenders starts sliding down the hood of his car. He makes a feeble attempt to grab at the box, but he ends up missing by half an inch and watches in horror as the box tumbles to the ground.

“That’s what you get for ordering off the kid’s menu,” Charlie snickers, but he still clumsily cuts his cheeseburger in half with one of the plastic knives they were given and offers part of it to Knox.

As much as Knox wants to decline Charlie’s peace offering, Knox hasn’t eaten anything since breakfast, so he forces himself to shut out the stubbornness that he feels and takes the second half of the burger out of Charlie’s hands. Charlie also offers up his box of wings that he ordered but Knox shakes his head; Knox was very sensitive when it came to eating spicy foods- a side effect of his ‘white people taste buds’, as the valedictorian in Knox’s graduating class would jokingly tease him about at National Honor Society meetings- and Charlie often ordered his wings at the highest spice level offered. So unless Knox wanted to completely scorch off his taste buds, the wings were out of the question for him.

The cheeseburger wasn’t all that bad, Knox discovers after taking a bite out of it, and the draft beer Charlie had selected had remnants of grapefruit and apricot in it and made for a pretty decent beer, even if the drink didn’t help with how cold the air was getting outside.

They sit on the hood of Knox’s car, watching the sky turn into a canvas of pastel pinks and dark oranges as they eat and talk about life until the sun completely disappears from the sky and the air becomes too unbearable to withstand.

Charlie helps Knox fold up all of the blankets while Knox goes to throw out their food in one of the trashcans located near their car and he may walk a little slower than usual just so he could savor the moment for just a little bit longer, feeling fuzzy and content from the alcohol.

When he comes back to his car he sees that Charlie is in the driver seat Knox is close to having a complete conniption, but as much as Knox was anxious about riding passenger with Charlie in the car again, he knows that it would be best for Charlie to do the driving since he had a higher alcohol tolerance than Knox and hasn't drank anything in the past hour and a half, so he clambers into the passenger seat and warily hands his keys over to Charlie.

As if sensing Knox's anxieties about him driving, Charlie sends an over-exaggerated wink in his direction as he revs the engine before he all but high-tails it out of the parking lot, almost knocking over a trash can while doing so.

To distract himself from Charlie's reckless driving, Knox replies to the messages he'd gotten throughout the day and never had time to answer. There are messages from his family, his sister, his sister's boyfriend, the poets. Even Chris sent him a message sending her good wishes.

After he replies to all of the messages he opens up Snapchat and immediately is gravitated to Charlie's story, so naturally, Knox made the point of clicking on his first.

Charlie's snap story is full of photos from all the places they visited with witty captions on them that make Knox snicker and smile like a giant idiot to himself.

Then, Knox comes across the last few photos Charlie had posted, and Knox suddenly feels like he can't fucking *breathe*.

The first one is a photo from Charlie's camera roll of Knox; a side profile shot of him staring down at the Woodstock monument, a small smile on his face as his gloved hand is brushing away some of the snow that had been on it.

He had no clue that Charlie had even taken it.

Attached to the photo was the caption 'happy birthday to this complete dork' followed by a smirking emoji and a purple heart emoji. The photo was followed by a video off of Charlie's snap memories of Knox a year ago going on some dumb rant to Neil. Knox's eyes were a bloodshot red, so it was clear Knox was absolutely high off his ass while he was ranting in the video about *Yoko Ono* of all people; a subject that always managed to get him riled up.

Neil was leaning up against a countertop of whatever house they were

in that night, tears streaming down his face as Knox goes on about how most of what Yoko had done was considered ‘performative activism’ cause she was so hateful in her personal life. While in his mind the argument sounded pretty valid, over half the shit he’s saying makes absolutely *no* sense, which makes Pitts start pounding his fists against the table, his shoulders wracking with silent laughs.

The video ends with Knox angrily declaring about how ‘Yoko Ono can *rot*’ and the last thing

Knox hears in the video is Charlie’s obnoxious laughter before the video cuts off to a photo from today of Knox and Charlie watching the sunset. Only their blanket encased legs and to-go boxes were visibly in the photo along with the sunset, but there was no doubt about it that it was both Charlie and Knox in the photo.

Knox feels his smile grow fonder as he clicks to the last post on Charlie’s story, which was a selfie of the two of them sitting on the hood of Knox’s car.

Charlie’s dark eyes almost look hazel in the reflection of the sunset, his eyes crinkled more than Knox has ever seen them as he grins at the camera and it takes Knox completely off-guard to see just how fucking *happy* he looked in the photo as well, his eyes squinted due to how bright the sun was.

It was a good photo. A *great* photo, actually.

Without thinking too much of it, Knox presses down on the screen and screenshots the photo, the sound causing Charlie to look over at him with a confused raise of his eyebrow.

Knox holds out his phone to Charlie in explanation and Charlie nods his head in understanding.

“It’s a good photo,” he says with a little shrug of his shoulders.

“Yeah,” Knox agrees breathlessly, his eyes trained down on his phone. “Yeah, it really is, isn’t it?”

Charlie stares at him, eyes unreadable, before he nods his head again, and Knox waits until Charlie has his attention on the road to crop the photo and change it to his lock screen background.

Chapter End Notes

The link to the If I Needed Someone playlist I mentioned at the start of the chapter: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5SieAOjKTkqQJBuKSnnIAL?si=NYLBlpKtRl2UjMi0lJaORg

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!